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Although food takes up such a large portion of daily life, its critical interrogation is a field of study that demands greater exploration, particularly given the current cultural moment that is beginning to recognize that ignoring our relationship to food has significant and deleterious effects on our health, economy, and environment. Even though there is some acknowledgement of the power of food to send messages, it is the narrative qualities—captured in discourse and behavior—that contributes to its meaning making, thus persuasive, properties. The stories we associate with food and food ways become food narratives, as they are converted through discourse and behavior into what Roland Barthes calls cultural myth. Informed by cultural and critical theories, food narratives as they are connected to narrative, performative language, and ideology become part of the rhetorical situation. Based on Kenneth Burke's conceptualization of rhetoric as an imbricated equation that includes meaning making, persuasion, identification, and consubstantiation, I argue that food narratives function as a rhetorical force used by "human agents to persuade other human agents into action" (*Rhetoric* 41) and that this persuasion occurs ideologically without public awareness. Finally, this lack of awareness results in non-reflective engagement with food and food ways that can become an opening for consumer manipulation.

Opportunities for the rhetorical manipulation of food narratives occur in many cultural contexts, but specifically, this study examines the following areas: cooking shows that maintain and perpetuate food narratives that result in non-reflective

engagement with the practice of cooking; fast food narratives that result in a manipulation of consumers to buy product; and finally, food narratives of politics that result in a manipulation of voters as they disengage with the processes of the election. Each of these contexts illustrates how food narratives are operating as a rhetorical device, ideologically persuading Americans to buy and think in ways that serve political and economic agendas other than their own.

THE RHETORIC OF FOOD NARRATIVES:  
IDEOLOGY AND INFLUENCE IN  
AMERICAN CULTURE

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

To Randy and Jenson:

My patient and supportive, husband and son.

## APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of  
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## PREFACE

The study of rhetoric is not my first career. I enter into this field with twenty years of experience in the restaurant business. For fifteen of those years, my husband and I owned and operated a fine dining restaurant in a small mountain resort town in North Carolina. Working every night serving food, planning menus, creating atmosphere, and tasting wine, I recognized that food does not exist without context. I quickly realized that I was not in the restaurant business; I was in the context business. People can consume the inanimate object known as food at home, cheaper and easier than they can when they go out. Customers were purchasing the obvious and necessary element of a well-prepared meal, yet they were also paying for the accompanying context, atmosphere, and story that we created. They wanted the whole experience. They wanted a narrative. I attribute the success of our restaurant, in part, to the awareness of the relationship between food and its accompanying narrative.

While I suspect that some believe the business of food and the study of language to be distinctly separate worlds, I found they have much in common. Language is more than marks on a page, just as food is more than an object to eat: both share similar symbolic qualities that are interpretable and serve as a way to make meaning. As our interests grew past the restaurant business and as I pursued an academic career in the field of rhetoric and composition, I began to understand the connections between language and the process of meaning making, persuasion, and narrative. Food narratives coalesced in my mind as a functional rhetorical device. Within nearly every text, I would

see the communicative properties of food working to persuade the most innocent and unlikely persons and characters, from the eighteenth century libertine to the postmodern actor. Writers were using food narratives to send messages, yet inevitably, it was the messages and not the delivery mechanism that seemed to garner the most attention. Food narratives were working rhetorically to persuade, while simultaneously maintaining their invisibility, and it was this invisibility that I found so interesting. I came to see this invisibility as an absence of *awareness* of food narrative's rhetorical properties. Along with my interest in other rhetorical devices, I became curious about how these food narratives functioned. What messages did they send? Who was sending these messages and for what purpose? In addition, why did some people or groups choose food as their delivery mechanism? If consumers cannot answer these questions, or even consider their interactions with food reflectively enough to posit the questions, then they leave themselves open for manipulation. For example, as a restaurateur, I sold more wine when the vineyard was connected to a personal experience that I shared with customers. If people are not aware, or reflective, about how they use food narratives to make meaning, then anyone who does recognize the potential power of food narratives can choose this rhetorical device to influence consumers. This lack of rhetorical awareness suggests that consumers are vulnerable to this particular type of device, which, unlike many other forms of rhetoric that we learn to decode, remains an easy and persuasive means to manipulate behavior.

As this is an area of study that remains unexplored, it became clear that a critical examination of the rhetorical properties of food narratives would have to be built from



scratch. However, when I began working on this project, I kept finding myself thinking in circles. I wanted some kind of simple, linear math equation that would explain how food creates narrative and sends messages, but what I found was much more complicated. The recursive nature of food narratives and their interrelationship between culture and the ways we construct meaning forced me to realize that food persuasion is not a one-dimensional position. The intersection of thought, feeling, childhood, personality, friendship, economics, family and national identity that contributes to the creation and maintenance of food narratives suggests that a linear analysis of food narratives would not work. Given the high number of variables in the equation, the rhetoric of food narratives is a swirling, muddled space, especially considering how those food narratives function to construct meaning and persuade people to make important personal, economic, and political choices.

As I sorted out the imbricated rhetoric of food narratives, I initially thought this project was going to address the issues of race, class, and gender. Clearly, food narratives intersect so often and in such meaningful ways with these important areas of cultural meaning making that I find there is too much to say. The more essential early steps of this project remain first, the articulation and theorization of the existence of food narratives and, second, the exploration and support of their existence in three pivotal and influential cultural contexts: television, fast food, and politics. Therefore, I limit this project to the explanation and definition of food narratives, a critical theorization of food narratives, and examples of how food narratives function in these three particular contexts. Thus, I leave open as an opportunity for further research the intersections of

food narratives and race, class, and gender. Future research should consider these contexts, and it is my hope that this will happen.

Even though this project does not explore race, class, and gender, this does not remove the analysis of food narratives from the reality of the cultural context that affects the remaining research. In particular, my experiences with food have been affected by these cultural markers. As a writer and researcher, my own standpoint affects my analysis and point of view. As a middle class, middle-aged, white woman, I am writing as a person who has the luxury to spend time doing this kind of intellectual work. I grew up with plenty to eat and a lifestyle deeply immersed in rituals of dining, one that afforded me the time and space to reflect on my own experiences and meaning-making process with food. Furthermore, my argument that Americans should pursue a more reflective interaction with food and food ways necessarily applies to those who are not struggling with the trials of poverty and starvation. Americans who have time to think about *how* they eat do not have to spend time thinking about *if* they will eat. In addition, consumers who have enough money and free time to watch cooking shows on television have most of their material needs met, leaving them free to follow leisure pursuits. Even the process of following an election through the media can cost money and time that is not necessarily available to all Americans. Finally, my experiences in the restaurant business that allowed me to see the connections between food and narrative were also affected by the socio-economic status of our patrons, as we interacted with our mostly upper-middle-class clientele, and accordingly, this context, as is the case with any researcher, continues to inform my point of view and analysis.

Although I do not miss the restaurant business, I do miss the nightly saturation in food narratives and their power. This project, to some degree, brings food and its persuasive influence back to the front of my daily life. While not the animated experiences of my previous career, food narratives and their rhetorical properties articulate the cohesion of context and substance that reminds me of the relevance of this relationship between food and narrative that imbues food with meaning beyond its physical state.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: EXAMINING FOOD NARRATIVES

Food, eaten and digested, is not rhetorical. But in the meaning of food there is much rhetoric, the meaning being persuasive enough for the idea of food to be used, like the ideas of religion, as a rhetorical device of statesmen.

Kenneth Burke

People tell stories with food. This seems clear enough. All throughout literature and film, there are examples of communication that hinges on interactions with food: Mrs. Ramsay's revealing decision to serve Beef Daube to her dinner party, a dish that she believes insists on timely presentation and will not hold up well, as her guests delay; Princess Leia's successful friendship with an ewok that cannot be built on a common language, so instead is built on a common need to eat; and the steward's disturbing and slovenly feast from *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* that conveys his corrupt inner nature. Food sends messages of love, comfort, sympathy, or even spite. In fact, although food messages are generally unarticulated in American culture, I do not think anyone would argue against the existence of food's persuasive power. Most of us have experienced this first hand, including participating in personal or familial food experiences or in more public, regional, ethnic or national food experiences. Experiences with food, expressed in the form of story or narrative, send messages in American culture, and my interest lies in how those food narratives are operating rhetorically.

Given that food narratives can function as messages within the rhetorical situation, what messages do they send? Who sends these messages? Who receives them? Most importantly, why do these rhetorical situations with food narratives merit critical attention?

Although food can be a vehicle for communication, this communication often has an unstated agenda. Food seems innocent in American culture because, in part, the current rhetorical understanding most Americans have with food is either lacking in critical awareness or absent all together. An awareness of the rhetorical potential of food suggests that consumers would recognize how food occupies positions within the rhetorical triangle. Food and food ways (including the practices of eating and cooking) can send messages, have an intended audience, and come from a “speaker” of sorts (one who cooks, sells, or promotes food). This absence of rhetorical awareness and critical interrogation of food narratives has potentially significant consequences. In particular, this lack of critical attention keeps food and food ways a non-reflective practice. An awareness of how food narratives operate rhetorically makes those food narratives part of a reflective practice of “intentional exchange” that is more engaged and, consequently, more meaningful than our culture’s current relationship with food and food ways (Finkelstein 9). Intentional exchange suggests mindful awareness when interacting with the environment, the culture, and other people within it. Furthermore, intentional exchange sits in diametric opposition to the uninformed, automatic behavior created and maintained through ideology, which works to reinforce dominant power systems without

the conscious, informed consent of its members.<sup>1</sup> Because of food's seemingly innocent state, it exists outside of the critical lens of its participants, keeping its interactions solidly ideological and outside the borders of intentional exchange, which are an integral part of a mindful existence, one controlled by thoughtful, intentional consumer choices.

Recognizing food narratives and their rhetorical position and role in meaning making can provide consumers with the necessary information to create this intentional exchange with food and food ways, an exchange that can lead to a reflective engagement with food.

A reflective life with food argues for a position in which people are able to recognize food narratives. Once food narratives are recognizable as an entity, consumers can then understand the role of food narratives in the process of meaning making. If food narratives contribute to meaning making, then it is essential to be able to then critique and reflect on the resulting thought processes. The ability to critique and reflect on food narratives suggests that consumers could then control how those narratives contribute to understandings of culture, relationships, and the dominant social systems that work to gain cultural advantage over others, all of which work together to influence behavior. Without this ability to recognize and act on an understanding of food narratives, consumers are susceptible to the ideological persuasiveness of messages sent through this mechanism, without their knowledge or consent.

Though currently unarticulated, food narratives exist. Furthermore, once we recognize their existence, food narratives then become part of the rhetorical situation, complete with the ability to send messages. If American consumers (both eaters and

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter II for a discussion of Althusser's conceptualization of ideology and its material consequences.

spenders) are not aware of the existence of food narratives, they cannot be aware of how those narratives are working rhetorically to send messages and persuade. This lack of awareness suggests that food narratives operate ideologically within American culture, and this ideological nature results in disconnected and disengaged consumer interactions with food and food ways that then result in non-reflective connections with others, ultimately leaving consumers powerless. Because food narratives work ideologically—that is, below consciousness and at the level of common sense—dominant social structures can encourage and maintain disengagement with intentional exchange and meaning making with food and food narratives.

When people are not aware of how food narratives work rhetorically in culture, they perpetuate a relationship with food and food ways that works ideologically to maintain dominant social structures—such as television networks, fast food corporations, or political organizations—that may prevent or slow down desired social change. An analysis of how food narratives work rhetorically in American culture reveals that in the specific contexts of television cooking shows, fast food, and politics, these narratives discourage reflective interaction with food and food ways and ideologically maintain dominant social structures attached to these three contexts. Consumers do not have to think about how to make meaning in the realm of food with any depth or reflectivity because food narratives can be manipulated to function as a stand-in for this thought, a mathematical variable, if you will, that can be substituted to help construct that meaning. Instead of thinking reflectively about the world and struggling to make meaning, people can use food narratives to simplify and short cut that process by filling in gaps in



experience and thought. Food narratives succeed in supplanting complexity because they simultaneously encompass multiple and differing significations. Food narratives simultaneously connect people physically, sociologically, psychologically, emotionally, and historically. This multiplicity of meaning makes it seem like people are more reflective with food than they actually are. Food narratives work as multi-dimensional meaning makers without any intellectual or reflective effort necessary, and people use them to make meaning, although they do not acknowledge that they are doing this. Furthermore, because the engagement with food narratives is at a surface level that *feels* more significant than it really is and because food narratives are operating on an ideological level, people are vulnerable to manipulation when food narratives are used as a rhetorical device precisely because food narratives are unrecognized by most of American culture. As we become aware of how food narratives work, then, we are better equipped to understand how they can be rhetorically manipulated to persuade consumers.

So, then, I return to my earlier questions: What messages do these food narratives convey? How are they conveyed, who is the intended audience, and why is this process significant? Although there are countless intersections between food narratives and American culture, I examine how food narratives operate rhetorically in three specific contexts: the culture of cooking shows on Food Network Television, the culture of fast food, and the culture of politics. These intersections illustrate some of the most persuasive contexts for food narratives to function rhetorically. The contexts of television, fast food, and political campaigns are situated in highly visible and public forums, and the potential for persuasion escalates, certainly, given the large volume of

exposure in each of these three realms. Like any other television station, the Food Network reflects American culture; however, as with all media, viewers come to see themselves in terms of what is presented on television as well, which indicates that not only is television a reflection of culture, but it also works to influence and shape culture. Given this pivotal influence to shape and construct social behaviors, combined with its volume of viewership, cooking shows on the Food Network wield a great deal of power over consumers. Fast food, with its expansive popularity with Americans and resulting impact on health and the economy, is also a critical intersection of rhetorical influence to explore. Finally, the saturation of media coverage that is associated with political campaigns, heightened and exaggerated through frequent photo opportunities along with multiple debates, news stories, and candidate advertisements, makes the intersection between food narratives and political persuasion compelling to examine.

Thus, the lingering questions remain: How do cooking shows on the Food Network use food narratives rhetorically to keep people from actively engaging in food and food ways? What significance does this have? How do fast food companies use food narratives rhetorically to keep people from actively engaging in food and food ways, and what significance does this have? How do politicians use food narratives rhetorically to keep people from actively engaging in the ideas and processes of an election? Furthermore, how do politicians use the non-reflectivity of food narratives to further persuade voters? Finally, asking these questions demands yet another: What happens when we are not actively engaged in reflective food practice and what are the implications of our current lack of rhetorical relationship with food narratives?

## **Defining Food Narratives**

The first necessary step in understanding how food narratives operate in American culture is to establish a working definition of what encompasses a food narrative. Food stories, or food narratives as I name them, intertwine with our daily lives and exist at many different cultural intersections within those lives. The elemental nature of food and its connection with the body and identity forge a relationship between eating and identity that is deep and unforgettable. These food connections are retained as the stories people associate with their food experiences. These food narratives can be personal, familial, societal, or political, yet they most often begin and are reinforced at home, which is one of the main reasons they are so persuasive. Family food stories are articulated over and over again and then become food narratives. Eventually these food narratives recede from the actual event and pass into family lore. For example, Aunt Kate remembers that I had a childhood hatred of beans, and as this particular food narrative continues to occur in the family, I become constructed as a bean-hater, even though much time has passed, and I have to defend my now adult, pro-bean stance each and every time to the family. In this way, food narratives can function as what Roland Barthes describes as myth, in this case, the myth of the bean-hater.<sup>2</sup>

While a food narrative of being a bean-hater is fairly benign, Thanksgiving dinner is an example of a food narrative that has been dehistoricized and operates as myth, in this case, myth that has much more influence over cultural practices and meaning making. Yet, this practice is so familiar that it seems to no longer need explanation.

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter II provides an extensive discussion of Barthes' analysis of how cultural practices become myth and how this connects to food and food ways.

Although personalized for every family, there is an assumption of some version of turkey, stuffing, potatoes, and cranberry sauce: the food of the pilgrims and Native Americans who participated in the original feast. Although as a culture Americans acknowledge Thanksgiving as a celebration of unity with the Native Americans, the legacy of the treatment of this population is essentially ignored. This is changing over time, as there is more cultural awareness of our role in the historic destruction of indigenous populations; however, the prevailing understanding of Thanksgiving's cultural moment as a positive success is still in place. The food narratives connected with Thanksgiving are mythical at a national level and dehistoricize the relationship to the genocide white culture perpetrated. This food narrative reasserts and reinforces itself every year through national recognition and through every reiteration of family Thanksgiving stories, endowing it with continually renewed social significance. Thanksgiving is an example of how food narratives, beyond the limits of family stories, have the power to influence cultural beliefs and contribute to how we make meaning on a much more significant and national scale. Whether personal or national, food narratives, though clearly present in culture, remain under-acknowledged and unarticulated in American culture and are therefore critical to examine.

### **Why is Food a Cultural Text Worthy of Critical Analysis?**

The ordinary, daily practice of attending to hunger contributes to the absence of extended discussion of how food functions in our lives; however, food essayist M.F.K. Fisher suggests an approach to food that connects eaters to a broader understanding of the

nature of hunger, both emotional and physical. She asserts, “[s]ince we must eat to live, let’s learn to do it intelligently and gracefully, and let’s try to understand its relationship to the other hungers of the world” (Lazar 23). As Fisher articulates, food occupies such a large part of our existence, yet it occupies so little of our critical awareness. What, where, and when to eat is our obsession, rooted both in physical and emotional need. It is the very repetitive and mundane quality of eating that makes it seem to have so little to say to us, when really it is all consuming. This is reminiscent of the ever presence of sex represented in the discursive power of sexuality in a repressed society that Michel Foucault discusses in the *History of Sexuality*. In this text, he observes that our fascination with not talking about the realities of our sexual being forces an ironic position that subverts sex below the surface, resulting in an endless and persistent talk of sex. Discussion and analysis of food holds a similar cultural position. Even though food is not a taboo subject in the way that sex was, and is to a degree, the very fact that we do not openly and actively analyze food, suggests the vital role and significance it must play in our minds. This notion might be dismissible as an unnotable absence in theoretical and academic conversation; however, food holds such a huge volume of our daily attention, and its pleasure, analogous to yet also prioritized above sex, is a chief area of concern for most people. If people are not thinking about sex, surely they are thinking about food.

Perhaps because of its ordinary and necessary function in life, food remains under-interrogated and too “obvious” to think about critically (Barthes, “Toward” 20). “Even—or perhaps especially—to the scholar, the subject of food connotes triviality or guilt” (“Toward” 21), and in his article “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary

Food Consumption,” Barthes clearly works to rectify this state of affairs.<sup>3</sup> He argues: “When he [sic] buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern man [sic] does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it signifies” (21). Food interaction is “an ‘attitude,’ bound to certain usages, certain ‘protocols,’ that have to do with more than food” (20). He further explains this food “situation” in his example of the French love of wine or the American love of sugar, in which he argues that these foods are cultural “institutions,” and “these ‘institutions’ necessarily imply a set of dreams, tastes, choices, and values” (20). We adopt these significations connected to our “dreams, tastes, choices, and values” primarily through advertising and media saturation, and, partially because of this exposure, Barthes ultimately believes that food has a larger impact on culture than we allow or recognize (20-24).

In addition to the large impact that media and advertising have on any cultural practice, Barthes argues that food signifies on a personal level, but he further states that perceptions of food are “elements of a veritable collective imagination showing the outlines of a certain mental framework” (21). In other words, within this “mental framework” there exists a collective belief or perception that people associate with particular foods or food narratives. Barthes argues that this collective perception demands a broader view of how we define food. He asks the larger question:

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<sup>3</sup> In a footnote to his text, Barthes adds the following: “Motivation studies have shown that food advertisements openly based on enjoyment are apt to fail, since they make the reader feel guilty” (26). I will add here that my open enjoyment of this project has fueled my fear and suspicion that it is a less than worthy scholarly pursuit, confirming Barthes’ analysis of one of the main reasons that food remains under-theorized and researched.

For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior. Information about food must be gathered wherever it can be found: by direct observation in the economy, in techniques, usages, and advertising; and by indirect observation in the mental life of a given society. (“Toward” 21)

Not only does this analysis provide a theoretical basis for the existence of food narratives in general, but it also clearly points to the potential significance of examining such narratives, as they are revealed in the specific contexts of public, collective interaction that the following chapters address.

Like Barthes, anthropologist Mary Douglas takes the structuralist position and argues that food can be treated as a signifying code that operates the way language does. Similar to a poem or other literary text, food can be systematically decoded for meaning, and understanding this code would therefore be important in order to analyze the meanings imbedded in food and food narratives. She defines a code as something that “affords a general set of possibilities for sending particular messages” (“Deciphering” 36), which is certainly a concept that can be applied to food narratives. She continues:

If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries. Like sex, the taking of food has a social component as well as a biological one. Food categories therefore encode social events. (“Deciphering” 36)

Food narratives also contain coded messages that convey cultural meaning about “hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries,” as well. Modeled after Barthes’ cultural critique of French fashion, Douglas’s analysis

further suggests that food and food ways respond to events in the world. Analyses of this kind consolidate her belief that food study is relevant for understanding ourselves. She argues that ignoring the coded messages within food because of the ordinary and obvious (to use Barthes' term) ways we engage (or do not engage) with food leads to a "false innocence" ("Coded" 109). Given the potential audience of food (everyone, all the time, everyday, everywhere), ignoring how food and food narratives are coded and decoded in our culture is a position of ignorance on a monumental scale.

### **Food Narratives are Particularly Persuasive**

If we know that food is coded within our culture, it is important to examine *how* food narratives are operating as a part of that culture. Or, in other words, what cultural systems exist that support and maintain the persuasiveness of these coded messages present in food narratives? An explanation of these cultural systems can help elucidate how food narratives work as a persuasive part of the larger social context.

In particular, the field of cultural studies examines cultural systems and how those systems control and make meaning, which contributes to the persuasiveness of food narratives. Cultural studies theorist Dick Hebdige argues that there are two meanings of the word culture: the learned, aesthetic of excellence and the anthropological study of people. Cultural studies merges these two conceptions of the word, so we can aesthetically "read" pop culture around us (657-658). Reading (or decoding) pop culture is a way to glean meaning from encounters with everyday cultural practices, such as eating and cooking. It is also important to consider that the reading of pop culture is



based on the fact that food is a coded, readable symbol, just as language is a coded, readable symbol. Furthermore, he argues that these coded cultural phenomena are, like linguistic signs, arbitrary (658). The fact that food symbols are arbitrary suggests that they not only can be “read” or decoded but that, once read, their meaning is fluid and not fixed. Therefore, food narratives remain open to interpretation. This potential for fluidity of meaning that food narratives symbolic nature offers makes those narratives feel particularly persuasive, as they feel open to interpretation, allowing for customized and personal meanings, influenced by our tastes and fueled by the cultural reinforcements of media and family.

Finally, Hebdige argues that all of contemporary society’s rituals of cultural phenomena—this includes food narratives—are converted into myth, naturalized and operating at the level of common sense (658-659). Food narratives are persuasive in this way because they are part of the coded rituals that are expressed in arbitrary, interpretable signs that consumers use to make meaning, yet this meaning making occurs outside the consumer consciousness. It does not feel like meaning making is occurring because food practices feel like normal, everyday living. The natural and common sense feelings embedded in food and food ways make the meaning making process feel natural and invisible. Food narratives, then, are persuasive because their naturalized common sense qualities make them feel extra satisfying. As opposed to reading or watching TV as activities that require active meaning making, eating (though as normal and everyday as reading or watching TV) does not necessarily require active participation in the meaning making process. However, because food and food experiences, or food narratives, are

coded and interpretable, meaning making is occurring, mostly without our awareness. Interactions with food sustain us and provide meaning, without us having to actively generate that meaning. In other words, these cultural phenomena of arbitrary and symbolic food narratives operate ideologically, thriving beneath consciousness to make food narratives especially satisfying and consequently especially persuasive.

Expanding on the notion that cultural norms, such as food and food ways, are coded as well as implicit, lurking beneath the surface of behavior and thought, the semiotician Jonathon Culler further explains cultural studies in this way: “[i]f we are to understand our social and cultural world, we must think not of independent objects but of symbolic structures, systems of relation, which, by enabling objects and actions to have meaning, create a human universe” (25). This explanation makes food and food ways “a symbolic system of relation” that suggests that they play a part in the creation of the human universe. The symbolic, or semiotic, perspective helps

to make explicit the implicit knowledge which enables people within a given society to understand one another’s behavior. Often, of course, this implicit knowledge is a deeply rooted set of cultural norms and conventions which operate subconsciously and which members might angrily deny. In these cases, the description of a semiotic system becomes an act of demystification, of exposure. (Culler 33)

In other words, people are regularly making meaning of coded symbols that are operating implicitly and subconsciously (or ideologically) in society. In this way, Culler articulates the place that food holds, as a “deeply rooted set of cultural norms” within the cultural systems that contribute to meaning making. Cultural studies explains how consumers are so susceptible to the persuasive pull of food narratives, while at the same time semiotics

works to help expose and demystify the meaning making process consumers attach to food.

That cultural phenomena, such as the societal rituals we have associated with food and food narratives, operate within ideology and benefit from demystification implies that some social groups are either advantaged or disadvantaged by this process. Cultural theorists would demand that we ask who benefits from this societal configuration. That is, what group is hegemonically advantaged when food rituals and their accompanying narratives feel “naturalized” and remain invisible? Hebdige, drawing on another cultural theorist Stuart Hall, defines hegemony as “a provisional alliance of certain social groups that can exert ‘total social authority’ over other subordinate groups by ‘winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural’” (Hebdige 661). Food narratives work to maintain hegemony through ideologically reinforcing dominant authority that must be reproduced and maintained by continually “winning and shaping consent.” It is in this process of maintaining and reproducing dominant authority that food narratives are at their most persuasive, even as they are completely absorbed and naturalized into myth. It is within their very unremarkable existence that food narratives work to reinscribe hegemony by gaining the consent and participation of citizens to voluntarily maintain dominant social constructions without their knowledge through reproduced ideology, embedded in social structures that are made to appear normal. Food narratives can be used to ideologically maintain social systems that are to the detriment of the very subordinated groups that identify with the food narratives in the first place, such as food narratives that reinforce

regional or ethnic identity. As ritual, food narratives function as highly persuasive hegemonic structures surrounding food and food practices to keep power systems in place, such as white food culture dominating the national palate, even though there are personal, regional, and ethnic food narratives that resist this hegemony by being local, personal, and contingent.

Further insight into the highly persuasive nature of food narratives lurks in the work of cultural and media theorist Toby Miller, who argues that definitions of culture move toward a comingling with state compliance. That is, to be what Miller would call a “well-mannered citizen” means to participate in culture, while culture is simultaneously participating with its citizenry, with all participants working to produce interpellated subjects; therefore, “[c]ultural policy becomes a site at which the subject is produced” (Miller 16). In other words, culture is articulated and perpetuated, and in that articulation and rearticulation is the moment or “site” that gives rise to the subject. This suggests that we can look at food narratives as a site where the “subject is produced.” Food narratives can then interpellate citizens in much the same way that any other ritualized element of culture accomplishes this task. The ongoing and persistent nature of food narratives suggests that they are an excellent site for this perpetuation of culture and the unnoticed creation of subject identity. Our identities are deeply connected to our food narratives, so that our subject identity, through its creation and maintenance in food narratives, easily creates and fuels interpellated subjects, “training” citizens through cultural policy to “find, serve, and nurture a sense of belonging through educational and other cultural regimens that are the means of governance” (26). Food narratives are part of the

“cultural regimens” that “train” citizens and “nurture a sense of belonging” that is significant in the creation of the well-mannered, civilized citizen. Miller argues that citizens are created through this process of training through cultural practices. In this similar way of drawing on cultural regimens, food narratives, then, work to reinforce national concepts of identity and citizenry, yet they accomplish this task without the conscious participation of the citizens themselves. This situation is much like Miller’s explanation of how citizens were indoctrinated into the idea of the self, or subject as an individual, through the adoption of state literature and artwork (2-32). This happens, too, through food narratives, as they are an element of civil society that creates and reproduces hegemonic consent that continually makes food narratives feel natural and normalized into daily life and, therefore, makes them very persuasive, both personally as an individual subject in society, and culturally as the society inscribes social constructions of that subject identity.

The postmodern cultural position of this subject identity further contributes to the persuasiveness of food narratives. Pointing to the tension between the well-behaved, civil subject who feels “free” to consume and “compelled” to follow the rules of politics, Miller, drawing on Foucault and Umberto Eco, argues that as subjects, we are no longer ontic (empirically rooted) or epistemic (representationally rooted). We are instead postmodern (rhizomatically rooted). We are no longer one self; we are a split self, split inside speech and discourse at the site of multiplicity of media (40-45). According to Miller, “The amount of information available to the subject and required of it exceeds its capacities, and turns it away from a transcendental view of itself” (45). Therefore,

institutions (and ritualized regimens such as food narratives) are the critical sites for the creation of subjectivity and struggles to define the self. When we can separate and name every part of existence through science, we lose the ability to achieve a total and whole understanding of the self, while simultaneously creating an inherent desire to do so. Food narratives create the illusion that we are engaging with this whole understanding of self, as they fill in the blanks between the parts that make up that whole. Instead, we are actually engaging with the parts, just as every other postmodern consumer does in contexts inside and outside the realm of food. Food narratives make a postmodern, fragmented subject identity feel more whole than it actually is and this is satisfying because it connects our desire to understand that “missing” whole self. Food narratives work to hold together our sense of self in ways that we do not get from other cultural experiences. This version of postmodern subject identity becomes positively associated with our interactions with food narratives, which are intimately connected to our being and, therefore, deeply persuasive.

In addition to the postmodern complexity of subject creation and the ideological and hegemonic position of food narratives within culture, another reason that food narratives are so persuasive is because of the familiar and intimate ways our food narratives connect us with others. In his discussion of language and knowledge, Lev Vygotsky’s analysis of the familiar and intimate ways inner speech functions to connect us to others is similar to the way food narratives function to connect us to others. His exploration of language acquisition patterns of children reveal that thought and language are deeply interconnected, so much so that thought does not exist without words to

capture ideas (210-256). Rather than moving from the simple to the complex, language acquisition, he argues, moves in the other direction, from the complex to the simple (218-221). Whole words stand in for sentences, such as a child saying only the word “juice” but the parent clearly understanding that this one word is a shortened version of the sentence, “I want juice, please.” This shortened version of a sentence that is represented by the one word “juice” is a simplistic version of what Vygotsky terms “Inner speech,” or speech that is purely for oneself. In contrast, outer speech is speech for others and demands more complete sentence structures to convey meaning. Inner speech drops the subject, relying on the predicate to carry meaning. Inner speech is “predicated” because it is already clear to the thinker who is the subject of thought (225-230). We depend on these short cuts all the time when we are thinking, yet when we have to write down our ideas, it becomes difficult to capture the wholeness of the thought in words, as we struggle to re-incorporate and articulate that missing subject, previously supplied without effort by our brain. Vygotsky states that “when the thoughts of the speakers are the same, the role of speech is reduced to a minimum” (238). Cultural narratives, and I argue food narratives in particular, function to elucidate the inner speech that exists in the mind. They work as stand-ins for whole subjects, at moments when “thoughts of the speakers are the same.” Vygotsky’s description of speech among friends illustrates this concept. He argues that speech among friends feels intimate precisely because friends supplement each other’s thoughts with subject concept groups that complete their separate and predicated ideas. In this same way, food narratives can supply whole subject concepts that augment predicated thought. One food narrative can stand in for complex thoughts

and feelings, ideas, ideologies, and beliefs and connect us to others in ways that feel intimate, like speech shared among friends. The nature of thought and language, then, contributes to the persuasiveness of food narratives, as they supply additional fullness and richness to our experiences.

Food narratives, as they are shared stories among friends, family, or regional or ethnic cultures, can supply unarticulated subjects that serve to make experiences feel more intimate and more familiar, thus persuasive. Yet, Vygotsky further explains that

inner speech is not the interior of outer speech—it is a function in itself....Inner speech is to a large extent thinking in pure meanings. It is a dynamic, shifting, unstable thing, fluttering between word and thought, the two more or less stable, more or less firmly delineated components of verbal thought. (249)

This dynamic quality of inner speech, its existence in the form of “pure meaning,” is the simultaneously weighty and dynamic characterization of the food narrative as it too functions as inner speech. Again, Thanksgiving is a good example of this phenomenon. For many people, the act of assembling a Thanksgiving meal, regardless of the actual depth of feeling shared among participants, functions to present and “construct” the concept of family. The concept of family does not need to be explicitly stated; that act of cooking the meal, and participating in any of its accompanying activities, embodies the concept of family. This feeling of family becomes an obvious condition of Thanksgiving. Food narratives such as Thanksgiving feel like speech among friends: familiar, intimate, knowable. It is the inner speech intimacy of food narratives that makes them so persuasive: they exist in the familiar world of personal thought.



### **Joanne Finkelstein and M.F.K. Fisher – Reflective, Intentional Exchange**

Since the familiar, intimate world of food narratives makes them highly persuasive, this suggests that if consumers are not reflective about that process of persuasion, then they are vulnerable to being manipulated by it. In order to make an argument for reflective engagement with food, it is first necessary to examine why reflective living is valuable. What is at stake if we do not lead a reflective life in general, and then, more specifically, why is it important to have reflective interactions with food and food ways? In her analysis of the practice of dining out, Joanne Finkelstein addresses this question, arguing that a non-reflective act is an uncivilized act. She understands “civility to be a function of the examined life” (9). She then determines that

civility cannot be exemplified by an unreflected obedience to habit or custom irrespective of how intrinsically humanitarian the customs are that may emerge from this obedience. Civility is a result of *intentional exchange*. The interaction may be difficult, conflictual, at times raucous; it may be genteel, eloquent, or hardly verbal. Irrespective of the appearance of the exchange, the hallmark of civility is the degree of engagement required of the interactants. (emphasis added, Finkelstein 9)

In other words, even though some exchanges with food might, on the surface, seem to be pleasant enough, if that experience is part of unthoughtful interactions of any kind, incivility taints the experience.

Finkelstein further argues that incivility exists “where sociality is without engagement, that is, when the individual does not examine the purposes of his/her actions but acts from habit or in response to the anonymous edicts of conventions” (12). As people participate in food narratives, they are at risk for responding to food interactions

out of habit, custom, or convention. This, too, results in uncivilized disengagement with one's environment. Building on the work of Norbert Elias, "being civilized," she argues, "means that one acts purposefully with reasoned needs as directives, so being civilized is when one has 'continuous reflection, foresight, and calculation, self-control, precise and articulate regulation of one's own effects'" (Finkelstein 164); therefore, a reflective life is a civilized life. In contrast, "[w]here the individual's activities are directed or driven by unexamined codes of conduct and seemingly insatiable desires, civility cannot be claimed" (164). Civility is dependent on "intentional exchange," and if food narratives do not include this, they are operating below the level of consciousness and are keeping our interactions with food and food ways at a superficial, non-reflective and non-intentional level, which disconnects people from the thoughtful exchange with their food experiences. The ability to critique and reflect on food narratives suggests that we are in control of how those narratives contribute to the meaning making process and how they are influencing our behavior. Without this ability to reflectively recognize and critique food narratives, we are susceptible to their ideological persuasiveness.

In contrast to the disconnected and uncivil encounters with food that Finkelstein warns against, M.F.K. Fisher enacts a civil engagement with food and food ways that illustrates and embodies what it means to lead a reflective life within this realm. She argues for a reasonable, connected approach to food, yet she also argues that we should approach food with passion and gusto, with all the desire we have but without the gluttony of over-indulgence (except sometimes). In essence, Fisher's approach to food implies reflective engagement. To have reasonable, passionate, *and* over-indulgent

interactions with food demands intentional exchange with these practices. Fisher explains that the “three basic needs for food, security, and love are so intertwined that we cannot think straightly of one without the other” (Lazar 60). Fisher’s reflective approach to food taps in to food’s connections with the mind and body in a way that most of society discourages, and it is this kind of reflective interaction with food that is missing from most of American culture, an absence that is, in part, unremarkable, as it is masked by the rhetorical persuasiveness of food narratives.

As Fisher and Finkelstein would both assert, a strong argument exists for reflective engagement with food, and although Walter Benjamin is not specifically discussing food, his analysis of the art image examines one impediment to this kind of reflective engagement with our experiences. In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” he argues that as art images become mechanized, or mechanically reproduced in print photography and film, humankind’s connection to those images shift significantly. In fact, Benjamin argues that we lose a level of authenticity of experience as we encounter the art image in this process of mechanization, and art objects lose their aura.<sup>4</sup> Benjaminian conceptualizations of authenticity and aura provide a foundation for analyzing how food, as it is rooted in ritual practice, becomes an artistic engagement with the world. “The presence of the original,” he states, “is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (78). That is, authenticity demands the existence of an original, which necessarily precedes a copy. This original image, then, is the authentic image: “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its

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<sup>4</sup> I explore this idea further in chapter IV during the analysis of how fast food disconnects people from reflective food practices.

beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (Benjamin 79). The authority of an object, the authenticity of a particular “thing,” to use Benjamin’s word, loses its aura when it is disconnected from its “historic testimony,” or its context of cultural ritual. Benjamin continues: “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (79). Looking at how images without an aura lose their connection to ritual, we can see how food and food ways analogously disconnect from their aura as they lose their connection to ritual. Benjamin opens up the possibility that it is more than the art image that is affected by mechanical reproduction:

This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. (79)

In that moment of loss of detachment, images no longer depend on authenticity based on ritual for value. Benjamin, with his concern for the shattering of tradition, makes a dire prediction about the consequences of this disconnection. Benjamin believes that art images, and images and experiences “beyond the realm of art,” that are too quick to process result in a diminution of experience, leaving no time to pause and reflect on what those images or experiences might mean. That is, if the image or experience occurs too rapidly for viewers to process fully, then people encountering these images or experiences cannot glean as much meaning as those whose experiences allow time for

reflection. Encounters with art and experiences beyond the realm of art, such as food, becomes a shallow, non-reflective connection.

Food narratives become disconnected from authenticity as they lose their connection to ritual or as that connection to ritual becomes based on a quick-moving, shallow interchange, with no time or pause for reflection. Benjamin describes this disconnection:

Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction. (97)

In other words, food and food ways fall into the same realm of the familiar as architecture: easily ignored and subsumed by the process of daily living. Certainly, the growing prevalence of fast food consumption and the shrinking number of people that cook at home confirms this state of distraction (Spurlock 226-227). Distraction becomes the habituated norm for our interactions with food, and concentration is obfuscated by the very practice of its familiarity and state of ordinary necessity.

However, unlike the spectators of Benjamin's era who were encountering the intensity of the image in film for the first time, consumers of art (and food) are now quite accustomed to the rapid-fire pace of film, television, media, and eating fast food. Yet, it does not seem like people have fully assimilated the significance of this shift. While people should be recognizing the potential impact of mechanized images, given the sheer

volume of exposure, viewers of art images (or food experiences) are dazzled by the quickness, beauty, and variety of what they see. That is, the art images, or experiences such as our interactions with food narratives, are so overwhelmingly fast, beautiful, and distracting that people do not need, or have time, to think about those images and experiences. Instead, consumers are content to be entertained rather than force themselves to live reflective lives that demand thoughtful, intentional exchange.

## **Chapter Overview**

Given that a non-reflective engagement with food practices carries potentially significant consequences, it is critical to theorize and understand food narratives so that we can examine how they function in American culture. It is then possible to analyze the role of food narratives within the rhetorical situation, looking at how food narratives work to send messages and make meaning for consumers. Furthermore, because of the familiar and daily exposure to food and food ways, any messages that are attached to food narratives feel naturalized and are therefore difficult to see and act upon. This ideological nature of food narratives suggests that analyzing the rhetoric of food narratives yields the potential for an awareness and better understanding of their influence, which can ultimately empower consumers to recognize and reflect on how food narratives operate and make meaning in their lives. Building on the definition of food narratives, the relevance of their rhetorical impact as well as the depth of their persuasive appeal, chapter II develops the theoretical framework that articulates the existence of food narratives. Each chapter then analyzes how those food narratives

operate rhetorically within the specific cultural contexts of television cooking shows, fast food, and politics.

In “Chapter III: Food Narratives and the TV Chef: Naming and Shaping Material Reality,” I examine the realm of cooking shows on the Food Network. As food and food ways shift out of the private sphere of the home and into the public sphere of television, these food practices have started to move closer to surface, or Baudrillard’s concept of simulacrum.<sup>5</sup> Cooking shows on the Food Network bring the excitement of cooking and the formerly private world of the chef into millions of American homes. The intersection of food narratives and cooking shows can be a shallow facet of a deeply important physical and ritual practice. The cooking shows of the Food Network are reductive and make preparing foods and cooking seem effortless, cut off from the actual work required of cooking. Chefs have their *mise en place* already complete. Beautiful projects in various stages of completion are ready in the oven, creating false impressions of simplicity and ease. What viewers see in this representation of food is only the surface of food practice, the simulacrum. Cooking becomes a non-reflective experience, as all of the thought and planning that make cooking and eating a substantial and fulfilling ritual are missing from the viewer’s experience. For when this television cooking experience translates into consumers’ “real world” environment, reproduction is impossible: real cooking takes real time and energy, far more than the half-hour time slot used to illustrate an entire meal on episodic television. Cooking shows, then, are false copies, a sign with no referent, a simulacrum. These shows create a food narrative about what it means to

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<sup>5</sup> I build upon Baudrillard’s concept of simulacrum in the analysis of chapter III and IV.

cook at home that has no real life correspondence, yet it is replete with what seems real to a viewer: ingredients we might know and recognize in settings that are familiar, including a pleasant and welcoming kitchen, as opposed to the reality of an industrial and commercial kitchen where, likely, these foods are actually created. For example, *Emeril Live* represents the food narratives that it is “easy” and “fun” to cook like a professional chef. The show includes a band playing live music that can captivate the home-cook’s attention. Viewers are easily swept up in the beauty of these cooking shows instead of actually engaging with the practice on a legitimate level, denying them access to a greater connection with their own food practices and reflective engagement with those practices. Food narratives, as represented through cooking shows on the Food Network, encourage people to experience a cheapening, a lessening, a moving away from real experience and into the realm of surface.

“Chapter IV: Food Narratives and the Culture of Fast Food” explores the rhetorical spaces of fast food and food narratives, where there is a similar cheapening of real-life experience that also prevails within the media, including the construction of fast food as myth. The food narratives associated with fast food are diverse and are surprisingly often in conflict. On the one hand, fast food restaurant mythology promises quick, efficient, affordable, and tasty food. Its narratives create impressions of ease and economy for the family, ease for a man without a woman to cook for him as well as ease for the working woman who still burdens the responsibility of feeding her family. For example, fast food creates a positive association with the food narratives surrounding family. That is, fast food piggybacks itself as a wholesome alternative to cooking when it



aligns itself with the powerful food narrative of a mother who provides meals for her family. Recent Kentucky Fried Chicken commercials, for example, promise a home-cooked meal to the neighbor boy down the street, but on the food on the menu is not actually prepared at home. Instead, this “home-cooked” meal is a bucket of purchased fried chicken.

Fast food practices and their accompanying food narratives as they are represented in advertising images and cultural mythology are, by definition, embedded in the Benjaminian notion of mechanical reproduction: mass-produced for volume and speed. Just as people experiencing film images at rapid-fire pace cannot experience art in the same way as those who are standing still in front of a singular image, people eating at fast food restaurants are discouraged from pausing in a reflective moment to consider their eating practice as sustaining family life or, more literally, sustaining the body. Buying fast food is obviously speedy, but the act of eating fast food is rapid as well, and the speed of interaction contributes to what Benjamin calls the aestheticization of the political. That is, the speed and mechanization of images (or fast food, in this case) disguises, and makes attractive, what should be a political issue: fast food is not, in fact, attractive at all. Its tastiness and speed mask its true nature, a nature of high fat, excessive additives, low-quality and over-processed ingredients, all of which are ultimately health hazards. Fast food narratives help gloss over the actual ramifications of a myth that encourages us to depend on fast food to sustain the body and the family.

Yet, in contrast to the negative food narratives surrounding fast food, there is also an emerging food narrative that fast food is unhealthy and bad. Fast food has come under

new scrutiny, exposed, for example, in the film *Supersize Me* or Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, as health conscious consumers, in growing numbers, are finally making political what has been constructed through food narratives as beautiful. So although it seems that fast food is the cheapest, the fastest, and the tastiest way to eat, food narratives surrounding the fast food industry are starting to lose their persuasive influence.

In "Chapter V: Food Narratives and Politics: Ideology and Influence," I analyze how food narratives intersect with the construction of identity and the political domain of presidential campaigns. When looking at the influence of food narratives, the historical connection between how people eat and how they construct themselves as Americans is critical to examine. Bob Ashley, et al. in *Food and Cultural Studies* explore notions of food and identity, arguing that national (and I would add regional or ethnic) identity can be constructed through Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined community" (81). Although members of this imagined community never actually meet, they still participate in food rules that share common elements, thus creating a sense of national community expressed through an attachment to food rituals and the narratives associated with them.

British cuisine, it is said, must include a cup of tea, which George Orwell argues has eleven concrete and essential steps. Similarly, American identity is identified with, among other things, the hamburger. Food and food practices such as these, when they are associated with national governments, institutions, politics, or public figures (like Orwell), become implicitly nationally sanctioned. Burgers, for example, are a food narrative that is associated with picnics, backyard barbeques, and, most importantly, the national American holiday, Fourth of July. This connection adds authoritative weight to

the hamburger food narrative as an essential part of American identity. National identity is re-inscribed continually through advertisements about what to buy on the Fourth of July: hamburger is always on sale and people are depicted grilling out for the holiday in sales flyers for food, clothes, or even electronics.

Reinforcement also comes from articles and media coverage about food and identity as well, such as when the Associated Press published White House menus, one of which was to honor Jazz and the legacy of Theolonius Monk. This menu included grits and greens, thus serving to reaffirm ethnic identity with specific rhetorical food choices. In contrast to the hearty earthy cuisine often identified with Black, Southern culture or Jazz, Prince Charles and Camilla were served celery broth and rock shrimp (Superville D1). Attaching food practices to government authority, such as this example from the White House menus, creates food narratives that work ideologically to construct and maintain national, regional, and ethnic identity. Since food narratives will always be connected to identity, it is critical to be able to recognize the potential impact and influence of these narratives on meaning making and the construction of identity, particularly as they are aligned with political campaigns in order to gain curry with voters.

In “Chapter VI: The Rhetoric of Food Narratives – Awareness and Revision,” I examine the consequences of a continued lack of awareness of how food narratives are operating rhetorically in American culture. Food narratives, as expressed and manipulated within the contexts of cooking shows on the Food Network, fast food, and national identity and politics, function as Althusserian ideology, therefore subverting an

engaged and reflective, meaning making process. If as Althusser asserts, ideology is “our imaginary relationship to the material conditions of our existence,” then food narratives represent and become that “imaginary relationship” to our real, material lives (296). To some extent, our understanding of the world, then, depends upon the food narratives we create to explain some of our most important relationships with food and food practices. Since food narratives are dehistoricized myth, they feel natural and normal, obvious, right, and true (Althusser 300); therefore, food narratives operate at the level of automatic behavior. This “normalization” of our food narratives keeps our interactions with food non-reflective, leaving Americans vulnerable to whatever or whomever chooses to align themselves with a particular food narrative. Such alignment can result in the easy manipulation of the public because of our deep and personal attachment to food narratives, many of which begin in childhood. A rhetorical analysis of food narratives can create an opportunity to revise those narratives in productive ways, ways that lead to an examination of how the messages delivered by this unseen mechanism control and influence how we make meaning in the world.

## CHAPTER II

### CREATING A THEORY OF FOOD NARRATIVES

We might well keep it in mind that a speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications; his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker's interests; and the speaker draws on identification of interests to establish rapport between himself and his audience. So there is no chance of our keeping apart the meanings of persuasion, identification ("consubstantiality") and communication.

Kenneth Burke

Food narratives are clearly a full and rich way of making meaning. The exploration of food and meaning making begun in the introduction along with the following theoretical foundation, when assembled together, become an aggregate, well-developed construction of food narratives. These conceptualizations of language and culture provide a theoretical framework for the existence of food narratives. Once established as a meaning making mechanism, food narratives can provide insight into how that meaning making process works rhetorically to influence and persuade consumers. The theoretical foundation for the existence of food narratives draws upon existing critical theory that defines food narratives and becomes a starting point for analyzing how these narratives contribute to the way Americans make meaning food, a subject that is encountered with a level of constancy that is incomparable to nearly every

other experience in life. These food narratives can then be situated into specific cultural settings to investigate their rhetorical and ideological function.

Food narratives depend upon the coalescence of several different theoretical components for creation. Food narratives are myth: they are created, perpetuated and made meaningful through the practice of language use and story, and this language use can have a performative force; that is, it can create the reality it names. Food narratives work ideologically to maintain social structures and cultural systems, and the process of maintaining particular social structures and systems holds value for certain groups in American culture. All of these concepts function together to manifest food narratives into existence and inform the ways that consumers depend on them to make meaning. In the epigraph to this chapter, Burke suggests that persuasion, identification, and rhetoric are nearly inseparable. Similarly, the creation of food narratives travels along a somewhat circular path that includes specific, overlapping concept groups: Food narratives are talked about endlessly, dehistoricized into cultural myth, created through language and symbol, told and retold in the form of narrative function, and hailed and named into existence through performative language. Finally, as a social ritual, they are confirmed, maintained, and manipulated through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA's).

Rather than being linear in nature, the following theories overlap and inform each other, giving life to food narratives. The key theories I discuss to animate food narratives begin with Roland Barthes' analysis of cultural practices. His analysis of how cultural practices become myth articulates and captures how food, as a cultural practice, becomes and operates as myth. Objects and practices that are mythologized take on additional

cultural meaning beyond their physical state that suggests food, too, can surpass its mere physical state to convey meaning. Kenneth Burke's analysis of how language works to name and select reality then shows how the words we choose to describe our interactions with food and food ways function to both inform and shape our understanding of those interactions. Once food narratives form through language, it is Francois Lyotard's discussion of narrative that further informs the existence and nature of food narratives. Lyotard argues that narrative knowledge is a powerful part of meaning making and that at times narrative knowledge is dominating knowledge, one that is legitimating and controlling in both personal and cultural contexts. Lyotard's argument elucidates how narrative knowledge in turn enables food stories, or narratives, to be shared, known, and adopted as "truth" by others. It is the narrative nature of knowledge that makes food narratives have a broader influence, as they move from the personal to the public sphere. Louis Althusser's idea of the pervasiveness of ideology, that ideology maintains dominant cultural power, and hails and interpellates the people in subordinate positions to reinforce and maintain the power of the dominant group, suggests how food narratives carry persuasive power along with significant social consequences. Food narratives, as part of social rituals and practices, function as ISA's, which control consumer behavior and inform how food narratives are perpetuated and why. Finally, J.L. Austin and Judith Butler argue that language can be performative. It can create real, material conditions that manifest through the discourse of food narratives. Food and food language, as it is situated in cultural ritual and history, can create what it names and then have cultural power as food narratives.

## **Roland Barthes - Cultural Practices of Food and Food Ways Become Myth**

The first theoretical contribution to the creation of food narratives comes from Barthes. How do the common cultural practices of particular foods and food ways become myth? Food and food practices, as Barthes argues in *Mythologies*, become naturalized, dehistoricized and turned into cultural myth through endless discourse that disconnects them from actual reality and hollows out the real experience of eating and cooking.<sup>1</sup> Objects and practices as they disconnect from history become myth. This dehistoricizing makes them feel so familiar that they shift into a state of being “natural,” into what we know as “common sense” (109-121). For example, Barthes analyzes how drinking wine has become “inherently” French (58-60). It is connected to a French person’s identity as an automatic practice, identified with rules that are obvious, such as the belief that drunkenness is a byproduct of drinking wine and not the goal. Even though this does not describe the experience of every person in France, the practice is made to seem universal and connected to “Frenchness.” Over time, the extended discourse about how and in what ways the French engage with the practice of wine-drinking cements its association with French culture, moving it from an ordinary practice to myth (58-60). Informing the existence of food narratives, Barthes’ analysis of mythologized cultural practices reveals how everyday experiences that we are apt to take for granted are actually laden with meaning (*Mythologies* 109-111). In particular, three aspects of Barthesian myth contribute to a critical theorization of food narratives: the

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<sup>1</sup> Although Barthes analyzes some foods and food practices in this text, he also analyzes many other aspects of culture that are not germane to this discussion of food narratives. Barthes’ analysis of myth is squarely situated within French culture; however, foods and food practices have a yet to be examined, critical significance in American culture as well.



slipperiness of language, the dehistoricizing of cultural objects and practices as well as the use of language to convey assumptions about the concreteness and correctness of cultural practices.

Of the three major aspects of Barthes' analysis of cultural practices as myth that are relevant to a critical theory of emerging food narratives, the first is how myth is connected to the elusive and changing nature of language and language use. Barthes explains that "[m]yth is a type of speech chosen by history," one that is rooted in what we say about the world rather than the "nature" of the world (*Mythologies* 119). That is, myth has no specific connection to actual concrete reality; it is constructed solely through language use and discourse within a particular culture. The extensive and repeated discussion of a practice or specific word is the mechanism that turns daily practices into myth, and this endless discourse influences the slipperiness of words and their meanings, in turn influencing the construction of myth (*Mythologies* 109-121).

Barthes argues that this endless discourse, constructed through the process of discourse upon discourse, or what Barthes calls meta language (or talking about what we talk about), contributes to the creation of myth. What we say about an object or practice becomes conflated with the actual object or practice (*Mythologies* 144). For example, the word "chocolate" represents a concept with a different meaning for each person. I might think "chocolate" means dark chocolate, and someone else might immediately think "chocolate" means milk chocolate. Yet, there is an assumption with language when using the word "chocolate" that it can clearly and completely represent the actual object we call "chocolate," even though a personalized concept of chocolate does not represent

one specific concrete meaning. That is, there is no one chocolate that is the archetype for this object. Instead, we have discourse about the discourse of “chocolate.” In other words, we talk about talking about what it means to eat chocolate, yet the talk about chocolate is not equal to the experience of eating chocolate: words try to convey the experience of eating chocolate, but they can never capture what it means to actually eat it. Over time, what is said about chocolate, in other words the discourse surrounding chocolate, can be superimposed onto chocolate itself, so whoever is talking the loudest and the longest about chocolate comes to dominate the discourse on chocolate. This discourse on chocolate, over time, can feel like common sense. Eventually, understanding what it means to engage in the practice of eating chocolate can come to feel “natural.” Surely, everyone knows what it means to eat chocolate, when in fact, what everyone really knows is the discourse on chocolate.

Barthes argues that the discourse (or the arbitrary narratives) surrounding an object or a practice, comes to seem like common sense explanations about how the world works, and this happens with food narratives also. The meta language associated with our food stories, or narratives, begins to supplant actual experience. So that the talk of food narratives comes to feel like, and replace, the actual experiences with food or food ways. The object stops being the object and becomes the story we tell about the object. Thanksgiving is an example of this process. The discourse surrounding Thanksgiving is a positive narrative that connects family in thoughtful, pleasant ways, yet many people experience disconnection during the holiday. The discourse surrounding Thanksgiving supplants actual experience and comes to dominate cultural understandings of the

holiday, even though actual experience, on a personal level, might be quite different or even in opposition to the dominant perception. The phenomenon of Barthesian meta language helps explain the cultural pull Thanksgiving has on those Americans who do not enjoy participating in this holiday, which elucidates the creation of food narratives.

The dehistoricization of objects or persons is another aspect of Barthes' study of myth that is critical to understanding the existence of food narratives. As food objects become myth, we attach meaning to the narrative that extends beyond the physical properties of the object's ability to provide sustenance. Food and food ways, as they experience the process of dehistoricization, move from the literal to the figurative, and "food" moves into "food narrative." How does this process of dehistoricization, or moving from the real to the mythological, happen? According to Barthes, myth empties practices or objects of their history and fills them with "nature." The function of myth is to empty the reality of a practice or object, to give it a perceptible absence of history. "Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; it purifies them, and it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification" (*Mythologies* 143). Myth is endless talk, devoid of history. Barthes explains that

[i]n passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth.... (*Mythologies* 143)

Through his analysis of Einstein's brain, Barthes illustrates how ideas or objects can become myth through this mutation from "history to nature." Einstein's brain stands in

for the whole of him, and his brain becomes separated, disembodied and therefore dissectible (*Mythologies* 68-70). The separation of Einstein from the historical body that houses his brain is an easy step to take, given the dominance of the mind/body split in our society. We think of the mind and our body as separate and non-interacting spheres: the mind thinks and takes care of us; the body looks goofy, irritates us, and ferries our mind around town. If we did not need our body to do this job of carrying around our head, we would probably get rid of it. Yet, the body of Einstein is in the real world of matter, which is a quantifiable world, as opposed to the world of the soul, which is not measurable or quantifiable. People transfer this measurability of the body onto the mind, assuming that the mind, too, is measurable, making it seem that knowledge, such as you would find in Einstein's brain, is also quantifiable and measurable. Given our western privileging of science, our culture highly values what is measurable and explainable through science and tests. This *measuring* of brain power comes to equal *actual* brain power that, in turn, finally comes to equal *real* power. Believing that a brain is measurable makes it seem that knowledge itself is measurable and therefore knowable and understandable in its totality. If it is measurable, a brain such as Einstein's must be within the limits of our understanding. Einstein's brain represents this ability for total understanding in the "simple" equation  $E=MC^2$ . However, the more we talk about his brain and its ability to have "the answer," the more disassociated it becomes from his body, personhood, and history. There is a shift away from the real and the material toward the magical and the mysterious. The simplicity of  $E=MC^2$  becomes what Einstein's brain *is*.  $E=MC^2$  elides with the discourse about Einstein, his brain, and his

theories. The discourse about his brain displaces the person it belongs to, and the person as well as the brain are drained of all depth and dimension (*Mythologies* 68-70). This process of draining objects and practices of depth and connection to history is the same process that informs the creation of food narratives. The narrative surrounding a food or food practice becomes emptied of its history, yet this narrative still conveys meaning. Once again, the Thanksgiving food narrative, as it is disassociated from the destruction of the Native American population, is an example of this dehistoricization.

The last aspect of Barthesian myth that provides insight into the creation of food narratives is the process of using language statements to make cultural practices seem “fixed” rather than fluid. Myth provides culture with a clarity that implies no discussion or analysis is required. Barthes states that myth gives objects and practices “a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. If I *state the fact* of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and *goes without saying*: I am reassured” (143). For example, at the coffee shop there seems to be a “right” way and a “wrong” way to order. The lexicon of Starbucks has altered how we order coffee. It is no longer acceptable to say, “I would like a cup of coffee,” which historically would have produced a simple cup. Instead, coffee drinking in general has become conflated with what it means to order coffee at Starbucks. Baristas correct the coffee order by repeating it back to the customer in the “right” form: “I would like a cup of coffee” becomes “I would like a tall with room for cream.” This translation process of the way to order coffee is stated as if it were fact: important and fixed. So as baristas correct and educate consumers about how to order coffee, this statement makes

this particular type of coffee drinking feel “right.” This is how to order coffee at Starbucks, yet it is not the *only* way to order coffee. Instead, it is a statement of a process with specific practices unique to Starbucks, not unique to coffee drinking in general. In this case, making statements about cultural practices that seem like fact implies that the Starbucks way to drink coffee is “natural,” and needs no explanation. As a culture, then, this way of consuming coffee reassures us; it feels familiar and normal. There is no need to analyze coffee drinking; the work is done; it is natural and obvious. Emptying cultural practices in this way “organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident” (*Mythologies* 143). Myth is reassuring in this way because it “establishes blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves” (*Mythologies* 143). This same process happens with food narratives as they are stated as fixed, already accepted beliefs, as we see evidenced in declarations such as the “carbs are evil” dietary craze that struck in the early part of this century, which created lasting impressions on the healthfulness or lack of healthfulness attached to particular types of foods.

Food narratives are mythologized cultural practices that are emptied of their history through language use, and it is this mythologizing of food narratives that influences how they function in American culture. Food narratives, as they become dehistoricized and turned into myth, are reduced to empty practices that are ritualized into daily non-reflective food ways. Food narratives function as these three specific elements of Barthesian myth, and thus Barthes’ work becomes the first component of the emergent critical theory that articulates and creates food narratives.

## **Kenneth Burke – The Creation of Reality Through Language and Symbol**

If cultural myth is created is through discourse about cultural practices, then it is critical to look at how language functions during the creation of such myths, and Burke provides a lens to do so. Given his emphasis on the relationship between language and symbol as well as his arguments that address how language creates and influences reality, Burke's ideas serve as a logical foundation for theorizing the existence of food narratives.

Burke defines humankind in relation to its symbol use and misuse, in which the act of being human, or existence itself, becomes the process of interpreting symbols (*Language* 3-9). "Much of our 'Reality' could not exist for us, were it not for our profound and inveterate involvement in symbol systems" (*Language* 48). What could be construed in common sense terms as "reality," Burke argues is merely a "clutter of symbols about the past, combined with whatever things we know mainly through maps, magazines, newspapers, and the like about the present" (*Language* 5). Food narratives fall squarely into the world of symbol use, as they are a collection of ideas and attitudes formed through language and experience. Food narratives are a bundle of "terms," a "packet" that carries greater weight than just one word. Yet the brain processes them in total, as a whole single unit. It recognizes the whole as a mathematic variable that represents a larger group of ideas and attitudes. This can be expressed mathematically as  $\text{food narrative} = \text{food} + \text{feelings} + \text{context} + \text{need} + \text{thought}$ . This equation represents how food narratives combine all of these elements (food, feelings, context, need, and thought) into a powerful package. This package of symbols can then be used as a complex representation of a combined set of thoughts and feelings, and this "bundle" of

symbols does much of the work of interpreting events and culture, without the obvious realization that we are pulling together and drawing on all of these elements at once.

As a symbol system, food narratives become what Burke identifies as a “terministic screen,” working to filter our knowledge of the world and transform and create that world in our own vision, through the screen of a particular individual or cultural food narrative (*Language* 44). As we name the world based on what is present in culture through the filter of this terministic screen, we influence the “reality” of that culture that inevitably ensues from the naming. How we name and identify reality, through specific language use, or terms, affects not only an understanding of that reality, but also the construction of that reality. Thus, food narratives are created and become our “reality” as we use terministic screens to name and identify our interactions with food and food ways within American culture.

### **Jean-Francois Lyotard – The Language and Power of Narrative Knowledge**

If, as Burke suggests, language selects and creates reality, then it is the language and custom of storytelling, or narrative, that enforces and reinforces this reality. Narrative knowledge gives power to the experiences we have with food and generates the phenomenon of food narratives. The narrative tradition of knowing the elements of a particular food story; understanding how to tell and re-tell that story; and finally, being an appropriate repository for the story, so it survives to be retold are the essential components—rhetorical components—that make food experiences become food narratives. Furthermore, it is Lyotard’s conceptualization of the controlling nature of



master or grand narratives that explains how people use those master narratives to make sense of the world. That is, master narratives work to inform food narratives as they affect and control how we make meaning of our food experiences.

Since grand narratives inform food narratives, it is critical to look at how grand narratives gain their power to influence the meaning making process, and consequently control knowledge. The power of master narratives lies in their ability to control knowledge and create reality. The narratives we tell to legitimate knowledge are given their power through the process of telling, re-telling, and listening. Lyotard explains:

Now there must be a congruence between this lethal function of narrative knowledge and the functions... of criteria formation, the unification of areas of competence, and social regulation. By way of simplifying fiction, we can hypothesize that, against all expectations, a collectivity that takes narrative as its key form of competence has no need to remember its past. It finds the raw material for its social bond not only in the meaning of the narratives it recounts, but also in the act of reciting them. The narratives' reference may seem to belong to the past, but in reality it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation. (22)

Similar to both Barthes and Burke, Lyotard suggests here that it is in the discussion or discourse surrounding a practice that master narratives find their power. An example of the controlling nature of narrative knowledge is the cultural construction of race. Race is a concept that generates an associated value statement, yet it is a social construction rather than a significant genetic marker. However, race also has a material reality: racism. Racism continues to exist through the constructed stories told and re-told about the “scientific” differences between races that whites used to justify this country’s earlier dependence on the enslavement of blacks. Through the “act of recitation,” remnants of

this story linger in master narratives within American culture and perpetuate racism.

“[Narratives] thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do,” meaning that the stories, such as the “reality” of race as a significant marker of human value, are legitimated (made to seem “normal” and “right”) through the very fact that they are stories being told and re-told by members of a collective (23).

Liotard argues that we draw on grand narratives as a stabilizing source of universal and total knowledge, and this too is another way that they exercise influence in our culture. For example, one such grand narrative is that science represents truth. In spite of the fact that it might be clear to people on an individual level that science cannot explain all of life’s events, there is a persistent cultural belief that science will provide answers to all of life’s greatest mysteries. This sense that the grand narrative of science provides access to all knowledge produces stability, which as Liotard suggests, provides reassurance. It is comforting to find order in the universe, and this comfort is sought in the form of the stabilizing force of grand narratives. That is, the world feels safe if it can be explained and understood in terms that are knowable, familiar, and containable within the boundaries of a narrative. Stability in the form of a master narrative is then equated with totality, suggesting that it is possible to look at the universe as something rational and understandable in its totality, when, in fact, it is possible only to comprehend a small part of the universe. These feelings of stability and totality contribute to the natural, normal, or universal quality of master narratives. Along with providing reassurance,

grand narratives gloss over social, political and cultural inconsistencies, with their overarching sense of universality. For example, the effectiveness of medical science seems universal, yet most people have direct, personal experience with an unsolvable medical mystery. That is, the grand narrative of medicine's effectiveness feels like a universally accepted truth. These narratives are so strong and persistent that there is a desire to resist that which goes against the order of grand narratives because it feels "unnatural" to do so. Thus, the stabilizing, total, and universal quality of grand narratives works to influence the way we make meaning by controlling cultural beliefs and therefore controlling cultural practices. The existence of the grand narrative creates the reality of the "truth" of medical science's effectiveness in spite of the fact that there is direct experience that contradicts that narrative.

Grand narratives legitimate knowledge, such as science is truth, through the telling and re-telling of story, and similarly, food narratives also legitimate our food experiences, giving them meaning and significance through that same process of telling and re-telling. Like grand narratives, food narratives seem like clear articulations of "truth" and feel culturally familiar and stabilizing. Although many food narratives are personal in nature, such as my grandmother's oatmeal cookies that allow me to remember her vividly whenever I make them, some food narratives function more like grand narratives, exerting more influence over culture. Hamburgers, for example, are generally considered American cuisine. That is, Americans have a food narrative that is associated with their national identity, and that narrative centers on the hamburger. When asked to name some of our national foods, this would likely be an answer. It is the food of the all-

American cook out, picnic, and Fourth of July. This food narrative has a totalizing and universal quality, meaning that the hamburger feels completely connected to American identity, yet this is an illusion created through the telling and re-telling of how and what Americans eat, even though not every American loves hamburgers or eats them regularly. “Thus the narratives allow the society in which they are told, on the one hand, to define its criteria of competence and, on the other, to evaluate according to those criteria what is performed or can be performed within it” (Lyotard 20). In this case, an American food narrative can define the criteria for at least one way of being American as well as how this American identity can be performed within culture. Lyotard argues that

a narrative tradition is also the tradition of the criteria defining a threefold competence—“know-how,” “knowing how to speak,” and “knowing how to hear” [*savoir-faire, savoir-dire, savoir-entendre*]*—through which the community’s relationship to itself and its environment is played out. What is transmitted through these narratives is the set of pragmatic rules that constitutes the social bond. (21)*

The “social bond” is constituted through the rules, in this case, explained and reinforced through the telling and retelling of the “rules” of the food narrative of hamburgers and American identity, as they are reiterated in advertisements connected to national holidays such as Fourth of July. The narrative tradition, in Lyotard’s terms, is revealed through food narratives, then, as “know-how,” that is knowing the elements of a particular food narrative; “knowing how to speak,” that is understanding how to tell and re-tell the story; and finally, “knowing how to hear,” that is, being an appropriate repository for the story, so it survives to be retold and enacted within culture. The power of grand narratives,

then, in the form of food narratives, functions to fuel the meaning making process that Americans attach to food and food ways.

### **Louis Althusser and John Fiske – Food Narratives, Ideology, and Social Norms**

If Lyotard's master narratives are stories that are so pervasive that they feel "normal" and "true," why is it that members of the collective do not recognize their powerful influence? In other words, what keeps master narratives and food narratives in place? One way master narratives are reinforced is through ideology. Althusser's articulation of ideology acknowledges how ideas come to feel natural, "right," and "true" (300). More specifically, ideology explains how a dominant culture, through a desire to maintain and control social power, can make cultural positions, ideas, or "narratives" seem invisible and natural-feeling. "Ideology," Althusser argues, "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (297). It is an imaginary world outlook that has material consequences. Ideology is a story that explains the nature of real, material society. The imaginary relationship of ideology, or the story we tell ourselves, "always exists in an apparatus, and its practice or practices" (Althusser 296). Althusser identifies the location of these practices within Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA's) such as institutions, education, government, family, and the church (296-297). All cultural practices, including food narratives and what constitutes food narratives, fall within the boundaries of ideology or the ISA's that maintain ideology. That is, there are no cultural practices that exist outside of ideology.

To understand that all practices, including food and food ways, exist within ideology suggests that food narratives, as stories that contribute to meaning making, function as a type of ISA. John Fiske supports this concept of ISA's and ideology:

[I]deology is not a static set of ideas imposed upon the subordinate by the dominant classes but rather a dynamic process constantly reproduced and reconstituted in practice—that is, in the ways that people think, act, and understand themselves and their relationship to society. (306)

These ways of thinking, acting and understanding, or ways of meaning making, then, according to Fiske, are linked, indivisibly, to social structures, and meaning can only be explained in terms of those structures. This structure is held in place by a set of social relations and frameworks, or what we would call society. In other words, the structure of society is held in place by narratives, rituals, and practices associated, in this case, with food and food ways. “Society, then, is not an organic whole but a complex network of groups, each with different interests and related to each other in terms of their power relationships with the dominant classes” (Fiske 305). Fiske argues that social norms reinforced through cultural narratives (and food narratives are a particular type of cultural narrative) benefit the dominant cultural group and are perpetuated as “normal” through the beliefs, practices, and stories of the subordinate groups even though the subordinate groups do not benefit from their diminished cultural position (307). Ideology, because it is not a fixed concept held in place by fixed practices, must be continually reinforced in society as a whole through ISA's and the rituals and practices within them, and those rituals and practices are embedded in food and food ways captured wholly by food narratives.

In spite of the fact that all of culture is ideological, members of culture do not recognize how ideology operates, and this inability to recognize ideology explains how food narratives, though common, feel simultaneously familiar yet invisible. Ideology operates at the level of “obviousness”; it feels “right” and “true” (Althusser 300). That is, it does not call attention to itself, and in this way ideology self-perpetuates. “Ideology never says ‘I’m ideological,’” and even though we are subjects within ideology, ideology does not give us the mechanism to recognize that that we operate and live within its borders, and this invisible quality, or what Althusser calls obviousness, also helps ensure its continued existence (300-301). Food narratives possess an obviousness that keeps them invisible, yet they still manage, through ideology, to function as a source of meaning making.

In addition to the connection between cultural practices and ideology, Althusser makes the argument that “there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects” (299). In other words, although people see themselves as independent minded *individuals*, Althusser suggests instead that we are all *subjects* in ideology. Fiske elaborates on Althusser’s conception of culture and ideology:

the idea of the individual is replaced with that of the subject. The individual is produced by nature, the subject by culture. Theories of the individual concentrate on differences between people and explain these differences as natural. Theories of the subject, on the other hand, concentrate on people’s common experiences in a society as being the most productive way of explaining who (we think) we are. Althusser believes that we are all constituted as subjects-in-ideology by the ISA’s, that the ideological norms naturalized in their practices constitute not only the sense of the world for us, but also our sense of ourselves, our sense of identity, and our sense of our relations to other people and to society in general. Thus we are each of us constituted as a subject in, and subject to, ideology. The subject, therefore, is a social construction, not a natural one. (307-308)

Subjects are influenced by what appear to be social norms, and this influence begins with how subject identities are culturally reinforced through ISA's, cultural rituals, practices, and narratives, including food narratives. We, as subjects, are then constituted through food rituals, practices, and narratives as well. In order to perpetuate social norms in favor of the dominant classes, ideology must recruit individuals to become subjects rather than individuals.

These subjects are constituted in ideology by the operation of what Althusser calls interpellation or the hail. Hailing is the process by which language identifies and constructs a social position for the addressee. Interpellation is the larger process whereby language constructs social relations for both parties in an act of communication and consequently locates them in the broader map of social relations in general, and Fiske argues that hailing and interpellation are essentially located within the social realm of the media (308). The hail calls; we recognize its call and respond. We recognize ourselves as subjects when we respond to the hail, and we recognize that this answering of the hail feels right, true, and normal. It is already clear that those who are in ideology believe themselves to be outside of it; that is, we are unable to spot and deny the call of the hail; there is a denial of the ideological character of ideology. Yet, we are "always already" hailed subjects (Althusser 300). We are born into a specific moment that carries cultural meaning. We take our father's name. We are male or female and participate in socially constructed roles of gender. We are rich, poor, or of a racial distinction that is measured by society, and we are taught to eat in culturally specific ways. As individuals, we are caught in the endless loop of ideology that turns us into subjects. It is this endless loop



that makes subjects work by themselves to replicate their own subjectivity. Althusser explains that “[t]he individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjections” (303). In other words, we are interpellated to believe that we are free, so that we will freely accept our subordinated position. Furthermore, the interpellation of subjects demands that when an “idea” hails us as a subject, we naturally want, even feel compelled, to respond, so that resisting the hail is impossible—we want to be hailed, to be recognized as subjects.

Food narratives, with their rituals embedded into practices as component parts of ISA’s, hail us repeatedly and interpellate us into specific ideologies. We respond to these food narrative “hails” as we respond to all other hails. We are happy and satisfied to respond, even when those hails are in direct conflict with what we might believe about ourselves. For example: I believe that race is socially constructed cultural practice, yet as a member of American culture, acting in contrast to my intellectual understanding of race, I am interpellated to respond to the hail of racialized cuisine, to believe that certain foods “belong” with certain races. This is affirmed in culture, for example, when the White House publishes menus designed for specific groups, including a menu honoring Thelonius Monk that served what is culturally perceived as classic black cuisine such as grits and greens. Not only do food narratives hail us into specific subject positions and ideologies, but because of the invisible nature of ideology, food narratives also serve to maintain dominant cultural power structures that we connect or associate with specific food narratives. Althusser states:

the ideas of a human subject exist in his actions, or ought to exist in his actions...and if that is not the case, it lends him other ideas corresponding to the actions...that he does perform. This ideology talks of actions: I shall talk of actions inserted into *practices*. And I shall point out that these practices are governed by the rituals in which these practices are inscribed, within the material existence of an ideological apparatus. (297-298)

Thus, food narratives can hail us into specific ideologies because they articulate a set of rituals within practices within ISA's, and it is ideology that informs the mechanism of food narratives, providing a theoretical foundation for their existence.

### **J.L. Austin and Judith Butler – Food and the Performative Nature of Language**

It seems clear that ideology and subject identity are in a dynamic state, participating in a fluid social moment that needs perpetual reinforcement and re-creation. Reality, as Burke describes it, takes shape through language, and the reinforcement and re-creation of ideology and subject identity also take shape through language. Austin and Butler suggest that performative language creates reality by naming reality into existence. The performative qualities of speech both shape and create reality as language names our culture. Food narratives can also be performative, participating in enactments of specific versions of cultural "truth" or reality.

Examining the nature of performative speech contextualizes how this type of speech helps construct and inform food narratives. Austin argues that not all speech acts, or utterances, are created equal. Utterances, he argues, are either constative (they report or state something) or performative (they do something). Constatives say; performatives do. Performatives do not describe, or report; they are not true or false. With

performatives, the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of the action. To utter a performative is to do it (Austin 4-11). These performatives are conventional, ritual, and ceremonial (Butler, *Excitable* 3). They work because of the historical context in the past, and this context of the past gives them power in the future. Speech acts perform the deed in the present, yet exist beyond and before the moment. “The moment in ritual is a condensed historicity” (*Excitable* 3). Therefore, performatives, or speech acts that create a material reality in the moment of the uttering, are able to act in the present and future because they are situated as a moment in ritual, that is, a moment steeped in cultural norms and expectations. Furthermore, as this speech act moment is “condensed historicity,” it carries forward historic understanding. In other words, speech acts do not occur in a vacuum. People make meaning from the speech act based on its historical and cultural context.

Therefore, if it is true that, as Butler argues, the performative power that informs the way we identify and name the world carries material reality and consequences, then the naming process, including the talk we have about food and food practices, has the power to create material reality that informs how we make meaning about our interactions with food. For example, we can name the reality of thinness or fatness. The labels “thin” and “fat” carry no actual meaning, but they are terms that perform reality. The naming of the label creates its reality, which influences how body image and cultural roles are defined. The label “thin” 40 years ago, as represented by Marilyn Monroe at size fourteen is different than it is now, as currently represented by any popular star who is typically a size zero. Hate speech, such as labeling or naming of this kind, as Butler

suggests, performs violence upon an addressee. Labels such as “fat” and “thin” perform action upon us and change our state of being through naming. We are no longer an organic whole person; we become, in part, what we are named. The naming creates the material reality, and these material consequences affect how we exist in culture. Being “thin” creates the material reality of job offers and, perhaps, financial success, just as being “fat” can create the material consequence of being judged as lazy and lacking in will power and initiative, which might impact social success in negative ways. Naming, such as the act of labeling, becomes performative speech through context and history, and this context and history, the source of agency and power of performative speech, can take the form of food narratives.

Language creates a material reality in this naming, and it is a bodily reality that food narratives participate in, as they too exist in this practice of naming and labeling. Explaining the way the power to name and hail originates in language, Butler states that

the one who acts does so to the extent that he or she is constructed as an actor (that is, given power) and hence is operating within a linguistic field of enabling constraints from the outset – and that power comes from language. Language hails us and we are both recognized and recognizable in that moment, giving us agency and subjectivity. (*Excitable* 16)

Identity and agency are located in performative speech acts, and because language gives us subject identity and existence, it is a condition of possibility and constitutes us; we are hailed and made alive by and through language.

However, interpellation can also occur without actually hearing the audible language of the hail. People can be interpellated without hearing or knowing that they

have been hailed, yet they are still constituted as a subject hailed or named, suggesting that labels and naming have the power and agency to do harm or have a material effect, even if that labeling or naming occurs outside of the physical body(*Excitable* 33). If performative speech acts can indeed create reality that harms, regardless of whether or not the person hailed is present, then the performative power of naming has a wide reaching impact on society, and this extends to the realm of food and food ways. Butler states:

If a performance provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that ‘success’ is always and only provisional), then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices*. It is not simply that the speech act takes place *within* a practice, but that the act is itself a ritualized practice. (*Excitable* 51, original emphasis)

The force of authority through repetition along with “authoritative sets of practices,” ritualized practices, at that, have the potential to create a successful, performative speech act. It is the constant repetition along with the authoritative force that ultimately makes performatives work, and they work because they are themselves a “ritualized practice.” Ritualized practice, that is, society’s authoritative repetition of speech acts, fuels the performative force of those speech acts. Food narratives, as a narrative form of ritualized practice, can function as performatives, as they are familiar, ritualized practices that reinforce and give authority to food speech acts that in turn create reality. Food narratives, then, particularly as they are aligned with what Austin describes as authoritative force, become performatives in specific cultural moments. Specifically,

food narratives as they align with institutions, as Butler argues, can have the authoritative power to bring about and make real that which they depict (*Excitable* 66). The White House menus of racialized cuisine created in honor of Theolonius Monk, then, become performative as they are attached to the authoritative institutional force of the government. That is, the theme-oriented menus become crystallized as “black” cuisine when performed by the White House. Furthermore, food narratives can hail individuals into subject positions that create identity and agency through the performative nature of the language that we use to understand and incorporate food narratives into our everyday existence. Given a specific historicized past, food narratives are informed by and can function as performative speech acts that have social power and cultural influence.

### **After Existence: Food Narratives Communicate and Persuade**

If we understand that food narratives exist and function as interpretable, coded meaning makers with a performative and ideological function, how do they further work to rhetorically communicate and persuade? It is useful at this stage to coalesce first a working definition of persuasion and second to see how this definition of persuasion fits within a definition of rhetoric. Yet, it may be nearly impossible to tease out clear and distinctly separate definitions of these clearly imbricated terms. As Burke works to clarify the terms persuasion and rhetoric, the boundaries between the two blur:

“Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is ‘meaning’ there is ‘persuasion’” (*Rhetoric* 172). Meaning, persuasion, and rhetoric are all mutually reinforcing and co-dependent; however, it would seem that Burkean persuasion and

rhetoric begin with an emphasis on meaning making. To ascertain meaning out of a situation is to suggest that symbols are being decoded. Since Burke, as we have already discussed, argues that people exist for the purpose of using and misusing symbols (this is in fact part of Burke's definition of what it means to be human), understanding those symbols, or making meaning of those symbols is a prerequisite for persuasion. Since I have already established that food narratives function as coded, symbolic language that is part of the human meaning making process, meaning and food narratives are already positioned in this Burkean equation of meaning, persuasion, and rhetoric.

Once the relationship between meaning making and food narratives is established, sussing out persuasion provides insight into how encounters with food ways work to influence consumers. Burke offers a definition of persuasion that resonates with practices of eating and cooking food. He states that "[y]ou persuade a man [sic] only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (*Rhetoric* 55, original emphasis). Identification thus becomes the most important, or first term, on which Burke's understanding of persuasion unfolds. Identification, he argues, is grounded, ironically in division. For if people were not different, there would be no need to persuade one another to new points of view. Persuasion, then, becomes, in part, the moment of identification of one person's ways of being with another, different person's ways of being (*Rhetoric* 19-27).

Food narratives are especially well suited to the persuasion of identification as they allow one person to understand another's point of view and rhetorical position. They create commonalities that are rooted in easily re-creatable contexts between people

who are, and continue to be, otherwise distinctly different. Sharing meals and the breaking of bread is a historic way of reaching a common understanding between those who are distinctly different. The seventeenth century gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, for example, states that “[t]he fate of nations hangs upon their choice of food,” implying that a nation’s ability to thrive in the political world depends upon its ability to serve the “right” foods, or foods that encourage identification with others and are hospitable, encouraging union rather than division (3). Union depends upon finding common ground between divided parties, and this common ground falls within what Burke describes as the “margin of overlap” (*Counter-Statement* 78). In spite of the fact that no two people are the same, the margin of overlap bridges the gap between their inevitable differences. Even as people experience margins of overlap, they remain, at the same time, distinctly different people, “both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (*Rhetoric* 21). The distance between people, both psychic and physical, motivates them to seek this “margin of overlap.” Burke argues that to achieve persuasion, a rhetor must step into, identify and then become consubstantial with another. Through consubstantiation, we partake of another’s ideas, identifying and then becoming, in part, one with the other, thus achieving persuasion.

In fact, Burke argues that the principle of consubstantiation plays an important role in society: “A doctrine of *consubstantiality* , either explicit or implicit, may be necessary to any way of life....and a way of life is an *acting-together*; and in acting together, men [sic] have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*” (*Rhetoric* 21). This acting together, or the sharing of “concepts,



images, ideas and attitudes,” is an overarching set of commonalities that people share, and these commonalities work to bind people together. Food narratives are an example of this “acting-together.” They are shared commonalities between people, as mutually understood “concepts, images, ideas, and attitudes,” and thus food narratives are a form of consubstantiation and therefore work to persuade. With one small step into another person’s food narrative, even if it is not completely analogous, each person shares enough common ground to understand at least a portion of the other’s point of view. Food narratives with their consubstantial nature, then, persuade in a Burkean fashion.

A definition of rhetoric layers within these understandings of persuasion and the meaning making process. Burke’s definition of rhetoric is a solid foundation for understanding how to position food narratives within the rhetorical situation. He explains rhetoric as “the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents” (*Rhetoric* 41). This definition suggests that rhetoric functions primarily as a form of language that induces human action, and it is the role of language as a symbol system that is Burke’s focus. He further defines rhetoric as “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (*Rhetoric* 41). Given the importance of decoding symbols to make meaning and given the use of words, as a form of symbol, to persuade people into action, rhetoric comes full circle as a mechanism that endows food narratives with a type of agency. Although food narratives cannot specifically have agency of their own, through rhetoric, they succeed in inducing action.

Messages delivered on the backs of food narratives can then be manipulated to persuade us into action without our overt knowledge. That is, people who want to send a message can use food narratives to send that message, and this can have specific consequences that other rhetorical devices would not necessarily deliver. I argue that because food remains a highly participatory and pleasurable yet largely non-reflective practice, people are more susceptible to the covert persuasive potential of food narratives. Since food is an arena that maintains a quality of banality and innocence, people do not expect to find manipulation there, and they are, therefore, less likely to look for or anticipate this condition. Manipulation by definition would imply coercion without one's knowledge, a condition that lacks free choice and goes against participation in a democratic American society that people in this culture believe they are a part of. In theory, Americans are guaranteed the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that implies a right to choose our identity, our social class, and our politics, all of which are contexts in which food narratives function rhetorically. If people are unaware of the persuasiveness of food narratives, any group or product can align itself with any particular food narrative with which a person identifies, and consumers would no longer be free to choose their own ways of being. Instead, the lack of reflective engagement with food and food ways makes it possible for outsiders to use food narratives to persuade and influence consumers, and when that happens, we offer ourselves up to be controlled by others. Since it is clear that food narratives, a source for meaning making, function rhetorically, sending messages to persuade consumers, often without their knowledge, the prevailing questions then must be these: What messages can and do food

narratives send? Who sends these messages attached to these narratives? And who receives these messages? Within the context of cooking shows, fast food, and politics, it becomes clear how food narratives persuade and influence consumers.

CHAPTER III  
FOOD NARRATIVES AND THE TV CHEF: NAMING  
AND SHAPING MATERIAL REALITY<sup>1</sup>

Thus by a roundabout route we come upon  
another aspect of Rhetoric: its nature as  
*addressed*, since persuasion implies an  
audience. A man can be his own audience,  
insofar as he, even in his secret thoughts,  
cultivates certain ideas or images for the effect  
he hopes they may have upon him.

Kenneth Burke

As Kenneth Burke suggests, rhetoric and persuasion both imply an audience who receives a message. In the case of television, that audience is a viewer. Viewers interpret and make meaning out of the images and words they encounter. This meaning making generally goes unnoticed, as most of television is designed to stupefy viewers into passively remaining in front of the TV long enough to see extended amounts of commercial advertising. Cooking shows are designed to encourage viewers into specific types of action. Few shows are intentionally created with the explicit expectation that viewers will try to recreate what they see on the air. Cooking shows, however, fall

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis of cooking shows on the Food Network is situated in the context of its audience members who are participating in food culture from a specific socioeconomic standpoint. These viewers most likely have enough food to eat, enough money to pay for Cable TV, and enough leisure time to watch television. The Food Network is inherently “classed” in this way, and this cultural standpoint affects the analysis of food narratives. Although food narratives are always operating in American culture, examining all socioeconomic intersections is beyond the scope of this study but remains an avenue for further exploration and research.

outside of this pattern with their clear expectation that along with entertainment, they will provide viewers with enough information and technique to try to duplicate meals at home. In Burke's terms, this is the definition of rhetoric: human agents inspiring other human agent into action (*Rhetoric* 41). Rhetoric, with its implied audience, bestows upon that audience certain qualities that are part of the viewers' experience. Viewers, inhabiting the internal mind of what Burke calls "secret thoughts," cultivate "certain ideas or images for the effect [they] hope they may have upon [them]" (*Rhetoric* 41). In other words, viewers, as they watch television, carry away with them any effects that programming might have had upon them. Viewers, then, as they encounter images on television create a material reality based on the effects of the rhetorical message attached to those images. Susan Bordo's analysis of advertising images in print and on television articulates that the relevance of such an analysis rests on the understanding that images of this kind not only reflect culture but also have the power to shape it. In other words, advertising and television have the power to influence behavior.<sup>2</sup> This is rhetoric, sending messages and influencing action. Television shows, including cooking programs, are also rhetoric, as they shape the reality of viewers who take away those Burkean "effects" with the hope that those effects will create a certain reality. So if cooking shows, that seem like innocent entertainment, are delivering messages and influencing viewers' behavior and, therefore, influencing culture, then it is important to examine what (and how) those messages are functioning.

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<sup>2</sup> Clearly, this is a well-accepted belief, as television shows are rated for content, as they are considered an influence on behavior.

Watching cooking shows for fun and for education, viewers occupy the rhetorical post of listener/receiver. Although viewers realize they are watching to have fun or to learn about cooking, they are also simultaneously receiving other cultural messages in the form of food narratives these shows create. Food narratives are the rhetorical device that persuades viewers to take away specific Burkean “effects.” Food narratives, because they are not recognized as a rhetorical device, deliver messages and persuade viewers without their awareness. This ideological persuasion occurs because food narratives are invisibly embedded into American culture.

Different from the direct manipulation of food narratives to persuade people in the contexts of fast food and politics, the food narratives that circulate on television have a more elusive origin. Multiple layers obscure not only who is actually sending the message, but also who benefits from these messages. Celebrity chefs, production companies, merchandisers, and television networks, all benefit from the use of food narratives to persuade audiences to consume either airtime or product. Regardless of who benefits, cooking shows become the site of identification and persuasion that influences the behavior of viewers. Food narratives, then, work to persuade viewers by sending whatever messages producers, programmers or hosts want to attach to them. Because food feels so familiar and safe and because most Americans do not currently have reflective engagement with their food practices, the world of food does not feel like a typical site of rhetorical persuasion. Though viewers do understand that television is a world of commercialism, food, because of American’s non-reflectivity, is not as easily

recognized as a tool of manipulation. Cooking shows, as a clear intersection of food and culture, are an ideal forum for examining how food narratives work as a rhetorical device.

The genre of the cooking show is not new. Earlier incarnations such as *The Galloping Gourmet*, *The French Chef*, and *The Frugal Gourmet* brought together the worlds of the professional chef and the ordinary cook. The format of these shows was decidedly simple: a studio kitchen, a chef, some food, and perhaps some kind of gimmick (gourmet sexiness, exotic Frenchness, or down-home earthiness, respectively). In the span of forty years, the number of TV chefs and cooking shows has exploded. Eileen Oliphant, Senior Vice-President for programming at the Food Network, suggests that “‘People feel guilty about food...but they don’t feel guilty about watching television.’ So in some ways people can get access to food and comfort on television” (Hesser F1). The Food Network taps into the connections between food, pleasure, and comfort, encouraging “guilt-free” food narratives.

Even though fewer people are cooking at home (Spurlock 227), more people are watching cooking shows on TV. The Food Network alone has 74 shows (some explicitly cooking shows, others more generally food-related) that are currently on the air, and other channels include cooking shows in their daily schedule, such as MSNBC and PBS. The early TV Chefs were operating in a five-channel universe with limited exposure, but now within television’s seemingly countless channels, the current volume of cooking shows cannot be discounted. Enough sustained interest in cooking television exists to support an entire network of programming. Considering that viewers can now choose from hundreds of channels of television programming, the success of the Food Network

represents a significant cultural interest in food. Currently, the Food Network “is distributed to more than 90 million U.S. households and averages more than seven million Web site users monthly” (*Food Network*). The Food Network clearly reaches an audience interested in food and entertainment. Other networks have food programming; however, the Food Network creates a nexus of food-related activity. It is a solid source for assessing the cultural food barometer in this given moment and therefore a logical context for examining the rhetorical function of food narratives.

In order to determine which cooking shows to include in this analysis of how food narratives work rhetorically to persuade audiences, I considered several factors: the potential following and audience make-up of the show, how long the show has been on the air, and its current stage in the commercial television life cycle. Although I considered using the *Barefoot Contessa*,<sup>3</sup> *Semi-Homemade with Sandra Lee*,<sup>4</sup> and *Iron Chef America*<sup>5</sup> all of which would add relevant data, ultimately, *Emeril Live* and *Paula’s Home Cooking* most clearly illustrate some of the ways food narratives work on

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<sup>3</sup> Although I am not exploring this show here, it is worth examining at another time as *Barefoot Contessa* circulates food narratives around image of understated class and wealth. Ina Garten generates food narratives that revolve around simplicity and quality, all of which come together in a creation of food that is beautiful on the inside and outside. She defines her food narrative with beautiful food that is clean, abundant, and fresh.

<sup>4</sup> *Semi-homemade with Sandra Lee* circulates food narratives around hominess and shortcuts: Sandra Lee says she is just like a typical viewer, struggling to cook and make it nice, while at the same time not having much time to cook from scratch. What is interesting here is that there is an assumption that homemade is better and that short cuts are tantamount to “cheating.” The implication is that short cuts are helpful, and we can incorporate them into our cooking, *but* if we had time, we would choose to do the fully homemade version of the dish, which would have garnered more cultural respect and value, indicating that there is a social pressure that we “should” cook from scratch.

<sup>5</sup> See the Emeril’s food narrative of masculinity section for a brief discussion of *Iron Chef America*.



television cooking shows.<sup>6</sup> Emeril put the Food Network on the radar of viewers and is credited with its successful growth (Littleton 51; Essex 43-45; Neff S10; Topping 84-87). Paula Deen is one of its current stars, experiencing phenomenal public momentum (*Food Network*). As Kenneth Burke suggests, “persuasion implies an audience,” and it is at the intersection of audience and message that both of these shows illustrate how food narratives influence and persuade audiences (*Rhetoric* 38).

Obviously, because all elements of television shows are commodities, the persuasion that occurs there must have a commercial agenda. Like all celebrities, Deen and Emeril both recognize that they, too, are a commodity that generates sales. Given the commerciality of television whose goal is to persuade consumers to consume, food narratives, as they are evidenced on cooking shows, play a part in that commercial exchange. However, though cooking shows on television are a good example of how food narratives work to persuade viewers on an ideological level, because food narratives have yet to be recognized as a rhetorical force, they may feel as embedded and invisible to the hosts as they are to the viewers. That is, the power at stake as viewers are manipulated by food narratives is somewhat fluid and may or may not be located in the most obvious source.

Once we can recognize food narratives as a rhetorical device, their properties, are easily uncovered. A close reading of *Emeril Live* reveals how he creates food narratives of fun and ease that give viewers a false understanding of the act of cooking. This false

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<sup>6</sup> Because of limitations of time and space, this study includes a representative sample of cooking shows that appear on the Food Network.

understanding allows for a disconnect between what is presented as “real” on television but is only a false copy of what seems to be real. Interacting with a false copy of cooking imbues that process with a superficiality that makes the act non-reflective. *Emeril Live* manipulates and persuades viewers through the construction of food narratives of fun and ease that are not only superficial but also nearly impossible for viewers to recreate at home. This impossibility of recreation further disconnects viewers from what could be a reflective, engaged cooking practice. Furthermore, Emeril’s use of food narratives to construct cooking as a male act persuades viewers of limited and stereotypical constructions of maleness that also contribute to non-reflective engagement with cooking practices, as they rely on unthoughtful conceptualizations of what it means to be both male and to cook in a culture that, with the exception of professional chefs, still sees women as the primary meal preparer in the family.

In contrast, Deen’s show creates food narratives of family and Southern identity that are more easily recreated for viewers at home, suggesting that food narratives can work in positive ways to persuade viewers and influence behavior, encouraging consumers to engage with cooking in reflective ways. Regardless of whether or not these shows persuade viewers of reflective or non-reflective interactions with the practice of cooking, this persuasion, rooted in meaning making, feels invisible to viewers, thus it works ideologically to influence consumers’ behavior, which ultimately disconnects viewers from acts of cooking and contributes to non-reflective engagement with food and food ways.

### **Food Narratives on *Emeril Live***

Analyzing the rhetoric of food narratives on *Emeril Live* necessitates a discussion of the potential impact of his shows. Emeril currently has two shows on the Food Network, *The Essence of Emeril*, a staged, studio production and *Emeril Live*, the interactive audience-driven production. At one point, his shows constituted three-and-half hours of programming per day during the Food Network's rise (Hesser F1). Although as of December 2007 Emeril has recently decided to stop taping new episodes of *Emeril Live*, the Food Network will continue to run the show through 2010. His ten-year long relationship with the network as a popular and stabilizing force makes his work iconic and influential, and his unusual nightclub atmosphere on *Emeril Live* makes this cooking show worth examining.

During its tenure on the Food Network, *Emeril Live* attracted a wide audience, including a 40% male viewership. When added to fact that the Food Network in general had "...the highest number of working women, new car buyers, and dual-income households of any cable channel," the audience reach of Emeril is quite large (Neff S10). These numbers suggest that men and women are watching this show and the network, and those men and women have spending power. Although the network does not make any direct racial or ethnic audience claims, *Emeril Live*, nevertheless, draws and has drawn an audience of both men and women who have money and time to spend. Considering that *Emeril Live*, on the air since 1993 and currently appearing in reruns, the volume of people that Emeril reaches is staggering, thus becoming a clear focus for researching the rhetoric of food narratives.

The large audience draw is not surprising given that *Emeril Live* exists as a strange hybrid of the traditional cooking show and the late night talk show format. While its basic interior structure teaches cooking instruction, its hard candy shell sizzles with glitz and polish. Elements of the late night talk show dress up what has historically been a flat, pedestrian kitchen set. Instead, *Emeril Live* has a large studio audience, many of whom are seated at a bar with full table settings or clusters of small café tables (also fully set) that surround the center cooking island where Emeril demonstrates most of his cooking prowess. This long, center cooking island extends perhaps 20 feet and includes a six-burner commercial stove, jars of cooking implements, numerous cutting boards, and pots and pans. Flanking the cooking island are industrial double ovens and stainless steel commercial refrigerators and freezers. Above the kitchen, the set includes a staircase that Emeril uses to make his entrance, which he does, accompanied by a Hollywood announcer's voiceover, befitting of Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, or David Letterman. Audience members clap with enthusiasm, standing up and greeting Emeril as he makes his way through the audience, kissing women and vigorously shaking hands with the men. All the while, the live band plays Emeril's theme music. As the band winds down, a suit-coat clad Emeril welcomes his studio and home audience to the show with an opening monologue delivered in the style of a talk show host. Gently but nervously pacing back and forth in front of the camera, Emeril delivers his talk show monologue, telling folks what the show has in store, or describing a bit of history that adds relevance to the menu. He shares witty opening remarks, then passes the attention of the camera to introduce his band. While the music plays, the camera pans back to Emeril as he steps to

the side of the sound stage, so he can transform from talk show host into chef. After being dressed in kitchen garb, he finally steps up to the counter to cook.

All of this talk show activity illustrates how *Emeril Live* functions more as an entertainment spectacle (replete with guest stars, chefs, and guest bands)<sup>7</sup> than a show that emphasizes how-to cooking techniques. All of these showy details are of the world of splashy entertainment rather than the world of cooking, and it is only after Emeril is dressed by his staff, exchanging his suit coat for a chef's coat, that he steps behind the counter ready to cook, and viewers see the first outward sign that he is a chef. It is clear that within this exciting lounge-like setting of the live entertainer, Emeril's dynamic and charismatic stage presence carries the show. Although his personality plays a significant part in the show's appeal, the success of *Emeril Live* lies in his ability to tell and sell a story. So what stories, or food narratives, does Emeril sell? Emeril sells food narratives of fun and ease. His show suggests that the practice of cooking is easy, and viewers (having been persuaded by his food narratives) try to replicate these experiences of effortless cooking fail and consequently become disconnected from the act of cooking. This disconnection ultimately contributes to viewers' non-reflectivity with the practice. Even though Emeril's show generates and maintains these specific food narratives that his viewers consume, he does not make viewers feel like they are "buying" anything, except perhaps a few good ideas for the kitchen. Emeril sells the narratives of fun and

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<sup>7</sup> Famous stars, bands, and chefs routinely make appearances on his show (*Food Network*). For example, one episode this winter featured Hootie and the Blowfish as guest musicians.

ease, and he makes this feel invisible for viewers, which contributes to viewers' experiencing cooking as a non-reflective practice.

### **The Rhetoric of Food Narratives on *Emeril Live***

Even though it may seem like Emeril sells recipes and information about how to cook, he actually sells a food narrative of fun. In Emeril's world, cooking encompasses more than just an assemblage of ingredients. His actions illustrate that *how* we cook (that is, the manner in which we cook, not just the how of the recipe procedure) is just as significant as *what* we cook. Cooking is worth watching, he tells us, because it is fun to do. Emeril's own enjoyment of the atmosphere on stage as well as the process of putting ingredients together illustrates just how much fun one can have "cooking." Or, to be more explicit, Emeril demonstrates how much fun one can have pretending to cook. Pretending to cook, in this context, becomes a performance, complete with a live audience. The superficial qualities of pretending to cook contribute to its non-reflective nature. These superficial qualities are reinforced through several aspects of Emeril's set. The live band provides a musical soundtrack to Emeril's kitchen antics, adding to the notion of cooking as performance. Spectators participate in his creations as active members of the audience; a few select people even join him in "the kitchen," sitting at the eat-in counter in front of place settings. Emeril's show moves people away from thinking of cooking as an act that provides edible and sustainable food to eat, toward cooking as an act that entertains. A shift from cooking as life sustaining to cooking as entertainment demands an analysis of what is lost in that process of transition.

Cooking can be part of a reflective engagement with food and food ways, yet Emeril's food narrative of fun disregards reflectivity in favor of entertainment value. The idea that cooking is fun is seductively enticing for those who feel the reality of the daily drudgery that cooking can be. Faced with the constant pressure to provide food for a family, many people find cooking a source of stress, and a cooking show like Emeril's supplies welcome relief. Viewers can re-envision this daily chore as a source of pleasure, joy, and amusement. At least Emeril's show makes it look that way on TV. That is, Emeril uses food and food ways to persuade viewers that cooking is not work; cooking is fun. This is an easy leap for viewers to make, given Emeril's attitude, personality, sets, and costumes.

Emeril uses language to reinforce this food narrative of fun. His signature phrases "Bam" and "Kick it up a notch" both attempt to capture the excitement that happens when food moves from being a mere ingredient in a pot into a delectable, well-prepared meal. Emeril typically uses "Bam" when he is putting the finishing touches on a dish, or adding an ingredient that seems to move the dish from dull to delicious. This suggests that the emphasis in cooking is about the final product, about the moment when it is finished and fabulous. However, this emphasis denies the potential satisfaction of the process that cooking can yield and emphasizes the potential reflective qualities of the cooking process.

Emeril further creates this image of fun, in part, because he removes from view all of the necessary steps required to produce food that involve hard work, including the tools and equipment that make his job easier for him than it would be for the home cook.

Although television provides the illusion that the cooking process begins when the show begins, cooking for Emeril, as it is for any TV chef, does not begin standing in front of the stove or counter, poised and ready to sauté onions or mince garlic. Instead, cooking begins with a thought or an idea about what you want to feed yourself and others, one that includes many steps before food is prepared and ready to consume. The cooking process that moves food from thought to form includes the following steps: an idea that takes form as an assemblage of ingredients; anything not already on hand needs to be procured, so not only does cooking require thought and analysis, it also requires action on those thoughts. Ingredients must be collected, paid for, organized, and put away. Then, after all of that, they must be prepped. Prepping includes cleaning, chopping, and portioning ingredients, making them ready to use. This accounts for only the most obvious steps in a cooking process that are all rendered invisible on Emeril's show (and most other cooking shows as well). Thus, cooking seems to begin as viewers watch Emeril standing in front of his audience ready to cook, as the show starts. Viewers are led to believe, through Emeril's food narrative of fun, that cooking is *only* about fun, when in fact, the cooking that Emeril enacts is more complicated than he leads viewers to understand. Emeril's food narrative of fun reduces cooking from a thoughtful, engaged process to a superficial entertainment spectacle.

Embedded in Emeril's food narrative of fun is a second food narrative worth examining: cooking is easy. This food narrative of ease includes the major elements of the cooking process, as outlined above; however, Emeril makes them invisible, as most of the cooking process is accomplished by a large staff. Because the cooking process is



rendered invisible, viewers draw the conclusion that cooking is fun and easy. However, this conclusion is based on an illusion: a corrupted image or representation. Cooking on Emeril's show is a corrupted image of actual cooking. Considering the concept of representation that "starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent" (Baudrillard 173), cooking on television, as Emeril's show now enacts it, has reached "pure simulacrum" (173), as it has moved through Baudrillard's four successive phases of the image:

1. It is the reflection of a basic reality
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality
3. It masks the absence of a basic reality
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (173)

Emeril's representation of cooking suffers from this same break down of the image. First Emeril's show makes an attempt at being a reflection of basic reality or "a *good* appearance" (173). That is, it takes place in a kitchen; it has food that we can see, and Emeril seems to be cooking with that food in ways that look familiar: he is chopping and stirring, for example. Yet this image of reality is not sustained. Upon closer scrutiny, the cooking process is reduced and simplified into the second stage of image breakdown so that it perverts what we know the process of cooking to entail. The cooking image suffers the third stage as an absence of reality when it becomes clear that food items have been partially cooked at some other time or place and assembled quickly. The quick change progression of the meal, with much of the essential elements of cooking taking place during commercial breaks, leaves viewers imagining what might have happened to

move the meal forward to its now nearly complete, post-commercial break stage.

Emeril's kitchen is "an evil appearance" of the image of cooking. As his cooking "masks the absence of a basic reality," it is just a bad copy and comparable to "sorcery" (Baudrillard 173).

Finally, the fourth stage of the image lacks any relation to reality whatsoever. Emeril's meals, as he prepares them, cannot be recreated given the information on technique that he provides. He frequently does not measure ingredients or actually give instruction on food preparation methods, relying on viewers' ability to "see" the cook's process through the image of the final product, conveying the principle cooking "instruction" through that image. These instructional techniques do not actually refer to anything that the viewer can see or interpret as meaningful. Watching Emeril's cooking show, then, is watching the simulacrum of cooking; viewers engage with surface rather than substance, and this engagement with surface has repercussions as viewers try to "cook" like Emeril in their own home kitchens. Through Emeril's food narratives, viewers are persuaded to engage with cooking in new, fun, and entertaining ways; however, this kind of engagement is shallow, superficial, and based on surface. It is based on an *appearance* of what it means to cook. This kind of engagement with cooking is disconnected from the actual experience and value of what it means to cook real food for real people, reducing cooking on television to a non-reflective, hollow exercise and forcing viewers to distance themselves from this potentially reflective process.

Not only is Emeril's food narrative of ease simulacrum, it is also reductive. Emeril constructs himself as a "regular" person to convey that cooking is manageable and does not require special training. For if we believed it did, most viewers would feel alienated by his show, which is certainly not the case. He routinely states that cooking "isn't rocket science," in order to position himself as an equal in the kitchen and not above his audience (*Food Network*; Hesser F1). Reducing the value of his cooking knowledge and expertise deconstructs the belief that if one can cook "fancy" high class foods, one must be a participating member of that class. Emeril's oversimplification of cooking in the form of this food narrative of ease works to persuade viewers that they, too, can partake of the same food experience as Emeril, regardless of their social status. Emeril does not want to alienate the person who might be intimidated by "fancy" ingredients or techniques. His food narrative that cooking "isn't rocket science" creates a Burkean consubstantial connection with viewers by constructing cooking as an "easy" process that both Emeril and the viewer can participate in. By creating a food narrative of ease and simplicity, Emeril rhetorically moves his audience to participate in the story that "anyone can cook," not just people who are trained as chefs. This results in viewers who are given the impression that cooking *is* as easy as Emeril portrays it and really "*isn't* rocket science." Yet, even though cooking could be very simple and easy for people to do at home, Emeril, without providing any real knowledge on how to prepare foods, chooses recipes that are not that straightforward and include many detailed and difficult elements, such as making homemade stock or deglazing a pan. Emeril's food narrative of ease leaves viewers with the impression that cooking does not require any

actual skills; therefore, this food narrative of ease reduces the actual value of cooking experiences, which contributes to viewers' potential for non-reflective engagement with the practice.

Emeril's food narratives of fun and ease are not the only ones he constructs. He also clearly creates a food narrative of cooking as a masculine endeavor. That is, he defeminizes cooking and distances it from narratives of domesticity. He accomplishes this task by attaching maleness to acts of cooking. The social construction of gender articulated by Judith Butler suggests that members of a culture enact and reenact social conceptions of what it means to be male and female. That is, even though bodies may be born a particular sex, it is the cultural practice of attitudes and customs that assigns gendered behaviors to those sexed bodies. Gender, then, is relative, contingent, defined and perpetuated by society, enacted by its citizenry through endless creation and re-creation in the media and at home (*Gender Trouble* 30-31). Certainly, Emeril adds much fuel to the discussion of what it means both to enact maleness and to cook. That is, his show puts forward specific narratives of maleness. The way he constructs male identity is reinforced through his creation and maintenance of food narratives. That is, his use of food narratives contributes to the way he "does" his maleness, and because he has such a broad viewer base, the way he does maleness comes to show others how to enact their own maleness.

Some of Emeril's ability to persuade his audience that his food narratives are valid is rooted in how he masculinizes what is typically construed as a female action by creating his own food narrative that cooking is, instead, a masculine act. With the

exception of the most exclusive restaurant chefs, most people who cook in this country are female. Certainly cooking continues to be primarily a female responsibility (Counihan and Kaplan 3-5). While defeminizing the act of cooking could have positive consequences by more equally redistributing kitchen labor among the sexes, Emeril's masculinization of cooking superficially performs maleness onto the female space of cooking. Constructions of gender typically associated with men and women are not changed through this process. So rather than cooking becoming an act that is depoliticized as its gender association shifts toward equality between the sexes, through Emeril's use of food narratives, the masculinization of cooking co-opts the kitchen, territorially claiming it as a male space. Emeril's show works to align the maleness of the professional chef with the gendered female space of the home cook. In doing this, he de-domesticates the home chef to de-feminize the act of cooking.

Emeril accomplishes this de-feminization of cooking by actively masculinizing his behavior. Emeril first appears to the audience wearing a suit coat. Not only does this indicate, as I mentioned earlier, the dress code of a television talk show host, but this also indicates the very essence of maleness. The suit is quintessential male attire. This notion is supported by the cultural practice of suit-wearing by women who want to be considered powerful in the realm of business or the professions, for example. To wear a suit is to enact the power of being male. Emeril wears this suit at the beginning of his show, in spite of the fact that this show would seem to be about cooking, an act that is generally coded by apron-wearing rather than suit-wearing.

Emeril makes the transition from suit to apron in another decidedly male moment: the arming ritual. His transformation from suit-wearing man to apron-wearing chef mimics the historically male scene of arming for battle. After Emeril has finished his opening monologue and while Doc Gibbs is going to town with the band, Emeril removes his suit jacket and dons his chef's coat. Yet, he does not dress himself. Emeril spreads his arms wide, as he is fitted with a microphone, chef's coat, and apron. In a strange parody of a medieval arming ritual, Emeril is dressed for "battle" by his staff of TV minions. This ritual is deeply embedded in Western culture, stemming from some of the earliest known writings known, such as *Beowulf* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and finding reincarnation and reinforcement in more modern versions depicted in movies such as *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* or *Star Wars Episode IV*. Sporting events, too, depict this ritual, for example, as boxers are gloved for a match, or athletes are taped and prepared for competition. Simplified less-agonistic versions of the arming ritual exist in images of women who help put the finishing touches on tuxedo-wearing men who are dressing for a formal event. Even the simple act of straightening a tie or brushing off a man's suit mimics the distinctly male gestures of the arming ritual. Even if this is an unarticulated male ritual—that is, men do not necessarily sit around and talk about the medieval arming ritual as it is expressed in modern life—the influence of current cultural heroes acting in this "manly" and "heroic" fashion is not lost on contemporary audiences. Emeril's arming ritual reinforces the maleness of this man-to-chef transformation by generating actions of cooking that result in food narratives that viewers associate with maleness, and Emeril's food narratives about cooking and

maleness culturally sanction a male body that cooks, while also giving men permission to both cook *and* be manly.

Emeril further creates a food narrative that cooking is masculine by suggesting that real men do not need to worry about fat and calories. That is, Emeril conveys suggests that men can enjoy cooking as long as they indulge themselves in the gusto and gluttony of eating big that is gendered masculine. This largesse is in direct contrast with the dainty way women feel they must eat, at least in public. As Bordo argues, small under-nourishing portions that indicate appetite as a controlled space are gendered female (139-164). Emeril's huge portions and predilection for fatty meats and chops makes the womanly act of cooking masculine by converting cooking into the manly act of eating heartily by increasing the portions and making Hungryman-type menus. Meat and steak are male favorites, for example, with Steakhouses usually booked on Father's day (Atkinson 8).<sup>8</sup> Emeril enacts this maleness by choosing mammoth cuts of meat; the pork chops are large enough to feed two people. His meats often have big Fred- Flintstone-type femurs. Chops of this kind are historically associated with maleness, typically seen in reenactments of medieval eating scenes that include gnawing on a large turkey leg. For example, the depiction of eating from the *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* that shows the steward eating a huge shank of meat off the bone. Emeril's appeal to men is confirmed by one fan who declares that Emeril "seems to have no restrictions about salt,

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<sup>8</sup> Carol Adams' text, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, argues that meat eating is gendered male, as men use food to hold power over women. Historically, men have not only eaten before women, but they have eaten the most significant and nutritious part of the meal: meat (Counihan and Kaplan 2-3).

butter, fat – and that’s the way guys like to eat” (Matulevich qtd. in Topping 4). Emeril enacts a food narrative of the masculinized cook by disregarding concerns about fat, calories, and portion size in favor of flavor and fun (and meat). According to Emeril, men do not have to worry about the consequences of eating poorly: they are men and can (and should) eat (and therefore cook) any way they choose to.

Another way that Emeril enacts a food narrative of masculinized cooking is through his motto, “Pork Fat Rules,” which frequently adorns Emeril’s aprons. This motto is a billboard for a manly approach to cooking and eating: real men need real food; they need rib-sticking food that will sustain life with the implication being that such food will make one a stronger man and a better candidate for natural selection. Big men, or those who eat big, will live longer and survive better. In other words, a man who eats with gusto, even gluttony, will be more manly, and this manliness will reap real rewards in the form of attracting a mate, increasing the possibility for the creation of progeny. Therefore, a “pork fat rules” policy might seem innocent enough, but it is a highly sexualized, male stance: a stance that Emeril employs to defeminize cooking. Emeril is creating a food narrative that argues that men can be masculine *and* cook. Extending this masculinization of cooking, Emeril further enables men to see that it is manly to *enjoy* cooking. Unless one is a professional chef, this is new territory for males, and Emeril’s food narrative that real men can take pleasure in cooking correlates with his testimony that real men eat big, not dainty. Emeril, acknowledging this gender-shifting maneuver, states: “I’m not doing what I am doing for the paycheck or to beat Martha Stewart in the ratings. I’m influencing a lot of people, particularly kids, which I love, and guys who



have been in the cooking closet for years” (Essex 3). Even his use of the “in the closet” metaphor confirms that men can “out” themselves and enjoy cooking, if done the “Emeril way, suggesting that to be male and to enjoy cooking in other ways is to exhibit female behavior that must be hidden, lest men be judged as less-than masculine.

As a corollary to his masculinization of cooking, with an emphasis on huge portions and lots of flavorful fat, Emeril challenges food narratives that circulate about healthy eating. With his “Pork Fat Rules” motto, Emeril advocates for an obvious reckless abandonment of health conscious cooking. He exhibits a strong disrespect for the desire to skimp on flavor in favor of health. Cooking that does not include pork fat is a pansy way to cook; it has no manly “essence.” Emeril exudes the belief that only worrywarts and finger-wagging mothers worry about eating right. Avoiding fat is not male, thus feminized and bad.

Emeril further masculinizes cooking through the use of his self-designed essence. This essence is a spice blend that he has created. We have some inkling of its composition, probably garlic, salt, and some pepper. Emeril rattles off a quick ingredient list for viewers that does not include proportions, so recreation is nearly impossible. To think about what it means to put your essence on food that you are cooking is not insignificant. Emeril “marks” the dishes he prepares with this “essence,” his essence. To think of a man’s essence, it is impossible not to think of the physical, seminal, male essence, and every dish, then, becomes marked as male, as he makes this addition to most of his recipes. This masculine marking of territory becomes cemented in the physical act of Emeril adding the spices to his dish with a flamboyant “Bam!,” thus claiming

ownership of this dish with the addition of his physical essence, marking them as male and as one of his possessions. Others can participate in this process through purchasing Emeril's Essence at the grocery store or on the website. This commodification of Emeril's Essence/essence is also strangely male. In other words, men who want to feel manly and powerful—like Emeril—can buy this manliness in the form of a commercial product. This gives the non-chef or wannabe chef a way to participate in the masculine activity of marking food as his or her own. Cooking is now completely masculinized, and this marking of territory makes it sexy for women to watch and persuasive for men to participate, particularly as males think about cooking as part of this cycle of marking and claiming territory that would add to their own attractiveness. Emeril creates a food narrative about his Essence that claims masculinity as it claims territory in a powerful and dominant male act.<sup>9</sup>

Emeril uses food narratives that are attached to gendered rituals to persuade viewers that cooking is a male act. Specifically, he transfers food narratives that are already associated with maleness onto food and foodways that have historically been gendered female. Furthermore, through Emeril's creation of food narratives of fun and ease, he persuades viewers that cooking is simple, masculine entertainment, which enhances the non-reflectivity of this process. This persuasion occurs without the

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<sup>9</sup> *Iron Chef* is another show that masculinizes cooking. The process of chefs cooking with limited ingredients and time to prepare them moves cooking into competitive sport. Even female participants are reduced to typically male, agonistic competitive actions. The winner of *Iron Chef* has not created a reflective engagement with food. Instead the end result focuses not on sustenance, growth, or nurturance, as might typically be found with cooking, but it focuses on looks and taste—the most superficial elements of the experience of cooking.

viewer's awareness. That is, under the guise of entertainment, Emeril's food narratives feel invisible and a normal part of the Emeril universe, and in this way they work ideologically to persuade viewers to understand the processes of cooking and maleness in decidedly superficial ways.

### **Acts of Translation – Cooking at Home the Emeril Way**

A TV show like *Emeril Live* creates food narratives about cooking that influence how viewers make sense of their relationship to cooking. The practice of cooking to feed ourselves and our families then takes on the cultural meaning of the food narratives that Emeril perpetuates and controls, which ultimately affects more than just viewers of the show. Given the size of his audience, the culture at large feels the impact of Emeril's construction of what it means to cook. Emeril's catch phrase "Kick it up a notch" has entered everyday speech, as I have heard it used in reference to many other arenas, such as politics, tennis, and even home decorating. Like his language use, Emeril's influence and ability to persuade viewers expands far beyond the Food Network. The ways Emeril uses food narratives therefore are also creating a wide cultural impact, with potentially far-reaching effects. Now reaching countless numbers of home cooks, Emeril's food narratives of maleness, ease, and fun become deficient as viewers try to recreate the "magic" of television in the home kitchen. As home cooks try to recreate experiences they see represented on TV, they face their own inability to mimic that experience. They feel the pull of the food narratives, but recreation eludes the home cook, and this inability

to recreate the “magic” results in a disconnection from cooking that reduces the practice into a non-reflective engagement.

The first, and perhaps the most obvious, discrepancy between Emeril’s kitchen and the home kitchen is the live New Orleans Jazz band playing in the background. Even if you consider that some people might have music playing in their kitchens, it is unlike the energy and dynamism that comes with a live band’s performance. Home kitchens do not generally have an exotic, live soundtrack. Do viewers really expect this at home? On a realistic level, the answer is clearly no. However, as the home cook stands in the kitchen in front of the stove, working through a recipe, there is a sense of absence, a lack. This lack operates at a subconscious level, so that the home cook cannot quite figure out why cooking at home does not feel as fun as it looks like it is on TV. Emeril has successfully pitched the idea of fun to the consumer viewer; however, the fun diminishes when the energy of the band is not pushing it along. This situation leaves home cooks feeling dissatisfied on some level, as their experiences in the kitchen do not mimic what they see on TV. If this were the only discrepancy, the self-aware home cook might find it easy to overcome; unfortunately, this is only the first of many dis-correlations between TV and home, setting up a cascade of disappointment, disconnect, and non-reflectivity.

Another discrepancy between home and TV is the notion of audience, which takes on an entirely different hue. In contrast to the TV chef, what kind of audience does the home cook cook for? The audience at home is much more likely to be of the eating variety rather than the watching variety. The performance of cooking on TV is situated in the moment of creation. The performance of cooking at home is situated in the

moment of consumption. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that family members or friends relax in the kitchen, watching you cook; however, the majority of cooking happens alone, without an audience. Even if there are people present, creating a “performance” of sorts, it is unlikely that those people would applaud after an exciting pan deglazing or an impulsive decision to use sherry instead of white wine in the sauce. Emeril’s food narrative of “fun” directs home cooks to try and recreate the excitement he generates around cooking, yet the solitary nature of cooking could come to feel like a disappointment, another “lack” if you will, rather than a potentially therapeutic and reflective time. Emeril’s food narrative of fun creates the expectation that the same kind of fun is possible at home.

What do home cooks do with the disconnect or disparity that they find between their home kitchen and Emeril’s kitchen? Home cooks cannot possibly recreate the recipes they see on TV. The recipe preparation is addressed, but superficially so. Emeril *seems* to be paying homage to the basic elements of cooking. We see empirical evidence of cooking, such as onion chopping, potato quartering, spice sprinkling; however, we rarely see a dish from start to finish explained or illustrated completely. At home, most viewers do not have staff to plan the meal, including help ascertaining how long the meal will take to prep, prepare, coordinate, and serve attractively. Unlike the home cook, there is never an item he cannot procure to complete a recipe. Pre-measured, but unarticulated, ingredients are ready and made available to Emeril. There is the occasional quick mention of an oven temperature but never a printed list of measurements on the screen (it is assumed that viewers will get this from the Internet), nor is there a detailed explanation

of cooking processes. Emeril's loose, "fun" expression of cooking techniques and recipe contents leaves many elements of cooking unclear to the amateur cook. Major parts of recipes are not covered on the show. For example, when Emeril makes a pie, the recipe for piecrust is not spoken of; rather, a perfectly rolled out and ready to use scratch crust appears magically on the counter during the commercial break. Because Emeril has a way of making cooking look easy and effortless, these missing steps go unnoticed, leaving viewers at the end of the show the impression that they have gained some concrete cooking knowledge. He does bring up and recap steps that occurred during the commercial break, but this short explanation is a cursory treatment of the details. If one had to use only the show to prepare these recipes, even with the aid of a printed recipe from the internet or a cookbook, a viewer would not be able to produce the menu of the day based on Emeril's description and illustration of the recipe (Hesser F1). He leaves out key steps and makes assumptions about what cooks know and do not know. Home cooks are left with trying to reinvent what they see on Emeril's show without the luxury of drawing on a clear recipe, directions, or techniques, making reproduction nearly impossible and potentially frustrating. The message home cooks internalize is that they have failed to recreate the "magic," and this failure results in a disconnect from what would or could be the engaged and reflective practice of cooking.

Even if a viewer desperately wanted to recreate the magic of Emeril's way of cooking at home, it would not be physically possible. Unless viewers have spent a lot of money on high-end commercial-type kitchen appliances for their home, they will be unable to produce the kinds of meals that Emeril produces. The grill will not get as hot,

and there will not have as many burners and ovens at the home viewer's disposal. Hesser argues that there is "A Façade of Accessibility" on Emeril's show: "Mr. Lagasse often deep fries the likes of onion rings and breaded eggplant. But even if you did want to duplicate his efforts at home, you'd have a hard time. He's using a professional deep fryer" (F1). Furthermore, this professional-quality equipment is constantly maintained by his staff. Nothing in Emeril's kitchen breaks without a quick replacement. All of his equipment and supplies are functional and at the ready.

Even assuming that the equipment and supplies are comparable, Emeril's ability to augment his chef skills with a capable staff will undoubtedly elude the home cook. The translation of cooking like Emeril at home breaks down further as we realize that at home, we do not have partially cooked turkeys, already chopped garlic to toss in a sauce, or homemade veal stock simmering on the stove. Food is always prepped and ready to use with the customary chef's trick of *mise en place*, which pre-prepares each ingredient in a recipe so that the process of cooking can proceed unimpeded without stops and starts to assemble and prep items. Again, this is work that is made invisible by the process of television. The impression for viewers is that cooking progresses forward without difficulty. These steps done in advance of the show make viewers believe that the menu Emeril is preparing can be tackled within the borders of its one-hour time slot. This belief is reinforced by Emeril's ability to seemingly cook the menu from start to finish within that timeframe. Although Emeril will confess that he is pulling a completed roast or chicken from the oven in order to illustrate to viewers how to finish a particular dish, viewers can gloss over this detail and linger only on the splashy (and delectable looking)

finished product. A few “bams” later, and viewers have completely forgotten that the meal they are seeing on TV is completely disconnected from any real version of what it might take to make it at home. As an *Emeril Live* audience member, New York Times writer Amanda Hesser suggests that the food produced on the show was not actually even that good, not retaining much resemblance to the recipe’s intended promise of deliciousness (2.23). Disconnection and disappointment abound, then, as we see the home cook faced with the realization that no one is doing their *mise en place*, there are no half-cooked items helping along the meal’s completion within a reasonable, hour-long time frame, and finally recipes on the show look good but may not even yield their promised bounty of flavor.

I suspect the last impossible act of translation for home cooks who try to “cook like Emeril” is the stunning and disappointing realization of clean up. Cooking on TV rarely includes cleaning up the aftermath of creation. Cleaning up after cooking does nothing to contribute to cooking as “entertainment.” This activity would seem ridiculous performed on TV with an audience and a live band. The absence of cleaning up on TV only enhances the distance between what it means to cook at home and what it *seems* to mean when watching cooking on TV. Comparable to the nature of romantic comedies focusing on dating and winning a partner rather than the ensuing space and daily work of marriage and commitment, cooking shows on TV such as *Emeril Live* could hardly focus on the banality of the daily grind of the home cook. However, just as most people would argue that long-term commitment has more meaningful, reflective and engaged benefits, so does embracing all the elements of cooking, rather than just the few that are merely



entertaining and ultimately shallow representations of what it means to cook and sustain one's body.

Viewers who turn their own cooking experiences at home into a "performance of cooking" reduce that experience to simulacrum, and accordingly, when they identify with Emeril's food narrative of fun, they are identifying with the surface of what it means to cook. Alice Waters, the famous Los Angeles chef, has a great depth of cooking show experience and agrees that cooking just for show or flash is problematic:

I am just opposed to the kind of entertainment aspect of cooking, where cooking is a game, where people are exaggerating for flair, where they are flaming and flambéing every other moment....I take food far too seriously.... Why would you want to get in front of a camera and cook a dish, only to have no one eat it? [The Food Network] is really not set up in a way that makes cooking feel authentic. It's like makeup. (qtd. Narayan 2.23)

Food, she argues, should not be a game or entertainment; it has greater context than these superficial connections. She suggests that, first and foremost, food is for eating. When this is forgotten, cooking becomes a hollow exercise.

Because Emeril's food narratives of fun and ease do not hold up during the process of translating these acts from television to the home kitchen, cooking can become connected to the sense of disappointment associated with the failed attempts at recreation, without viewers necessarily recognizing that their failure is not their fault. Instead, fault lies in the show's ability to persuade viewers to believe in the food narratives of fun, ease, and masculinity that suggest that cooking the *Emeril Live* way is how cooking *should* be. This persuasion, because it is invisibly immersed in the food narratives that

Emeril's show constructs, works ideologically, without viewers' active awareness, which also makes them non-reflective.

### **Food Narratives on *Paula's Home Cooking***

In contrast to the food narratives on Emeril that send problematic messages to viewers, Deen sends messages that seem more positive. However, both shows, because they are sending these messages ideologically, promote a degree of non-reflective engagement with food and food ways. As the analysis of food narratives on Emeril revealed their potentially negative influence that could result in non-reflective engagement with food, it is useful to examine the food narratives of *Paula's Home Cooking* in order to see how food narratives, still persuading ideologically can, send positive messages that might engage viewers with food more reflectively. However, this positive message is mitigated by the delivery mechanism. Because viewers do not recognize food narratives and their persuasive influence, they are vulnerable to behavior control, both positive and negative. Recognizing the food narratives associated with Deen helps uncover this rhetorical device and provides viewers with an opportunity to make active choices about their engagements with food and food ways.

Deen uses food narratives of family and Southern identity to persuade viewers that cooking is an act that connects people to each other. This connection encourages reflective engagement with food and food ways. For Deen, though she never uses the term "food narrative," actively encourages the audience to connect food and story. So not only does Deen intentionally encourage an awareness of creating food narratives as a

source of meaning making and reflective engagement with food, she accomplishes this goal by articulating her own personal stories of family and Southern identity to persuade viewers of the value of this reflective engagement.

However, Deen's food narratives that result in reflective interactions are mitigated by the non-reflective nature with which she delivers those narratives. So even though food narratives, as they are used on the show, work ideologically to persuade viewers to reflectively engage with food and cooking, because this engagement happens ideologically, that is non-reflectively, we have to consider those messages of connectedness tainted, to a degree, as they are designed to serve purposes other than our own, such as programmers, production companies, or even the hosts themselves as they sell their own celebrity.

Deen's celebrity success is built upon her identity as a down-home Southern woman. Her show is set in what viewers are led to believe is her lovely, sprawling Savannah home. The kitchen set seems even more personal as her dogs and husband routinely make their way in and out of the kitchen, looking for snacks. She is wearing regular clothes, without an apron. Her hair and makeup are perfect, and she begins every show with an enthusiastic "Hi Y'all!" that captures her energy and Southern spirit in one deft linguistic maneuver. A previously divorced entrepreneur, she comes from humble roots. Deen, given her home and surroundings, must clearly love the beautiful and the expensive; however, she never appears pretentious, snobby, or fake. Her audience covers a wide range of constituents, and since her show airs during the day, the Food Network assumes that it is mostly stay at home women who are watching (*Food Network*;

Becker 3). Regardless of who is watching, Deen aims to portray working with food as an act that connects people, making cooking as accessible as possible, with easy, traditional recipes, and she accomplishes this through aligning herself with specific food narratives that work rhetorically to persuade viewers of her standpoint (“Paula’s Interview”).

### **The Rhetoric of Food Narratives on *Paula’s Home Cooking***

From the moment the opening credits roll on *Paula’s Home Cooking* it is clear that this show is about family. Deen attaches her connections to food solidly to her connections with family. She describes her own story in the voiceover of the opening scenes of her show:

I was very lucky because I came from a family of wonderful Southern cooks. And at 42 years old I was faced with having to support myself and my two sons, and I turned to my first love, which is cooking, so I started cooking for a living. I think food is such a big part of family, and I hope that y’all can watch me and learn to have fun with yours, while building wonderful memories around the food that you’re preparing. (*Food Network* PA1A01)

As she narrates the opening, the images reveal pictures of her sons as boys, herself as a young mother as well as current scenes of her family cooking and laughing together.

From the outset, Deen creates a food narrative that argues for connections between cooking and family. In addition to these scenes that open every show, her daily menus often emerge from a family-centered theme, such as a baby shower, a house warming, or a holiday. She interweaves her family stories throughout the show, including particular

recipes from her grandmother and mother to solidify this food narrative of family for viewers.

As it is for Emeril's seductive portrayal of the food narrative of fun, Deen's food narrative of family is an easy sell for audiences, as it works ideologically to send the message that food and family belong together. Most TV consumers already understand and accept the connections between family and food; Deen is just reinforcing (and capitalizing on) these ideas. In an interview for the Chefography show about Deen, she describes how fond memories of her grandmother, mother, and father formed in the kitchen. Time in the kitchen, she suggests, is integral to the formation of these memories:

It's very important to me that I brought my boys into the kitchen. In fact, Jamie got his first cookbook for Christmas when he was 6 years old. And it was just important to me that my children come into my kitchen because that's where some of your sweetest memories are formed, around that table and around that stove. ("Paula's Interview")

Deen's belief in the power of the food narrative of family pervades every recipe and story that viewers see on her show, and she articulates this food narrative repeatedly on her shows, making it obvious. She says on one of her holiday shows, "I am so excited y'all. Thanksgiving is finally here, a holiday that I look so forward to because it's really all about food, family, and love, and just being together" (*Food Network* Episode PA1A01). Deen does more than just talk about the importance of the food narrative of family. Through her inclusion of her family members in the kitchen, cooking together on many episodes, she successfully enacts and re-inscribes it nearly every moment she is on the air. On another one of her Thanksgiving shows, for example, she features her two grown

boys with her in the kitchen, cooking their own recipes (Episode PA1C18). Deen's repeated articulation of the food narrative of family, combined with the way she includes family members in the kitchen as she cooks, work to illustrate the value that she places on the connection between story and family. Her active participation in this connection, along with her articulation of its positive value in her life, confirm and validate the food narrative of family for viewers, persuading them that engaged, reflective interactions with food yields positive results, even though viewers are unaware that they are being persuaded ideologically of this positive message.

However, the food narrative of family is not the only narrative that finds expression on *Paula's Home Cooking*. Starting with a heavily accented "Hey Y'all!," Deen offers an image of her Southern identity, including pictures of fried chicken, the farm, and country scenes, all of which help reinforce her Southernness. Deen embodies her own Georgia Southernness. Right away, from the first opening bars of the theme song and her voiceover describing her humble beginnings, viewers know that she is Southern, will cook like a Southerner, and will help the viewer cook like a Southerner too. Therefore, any recipes that she illustrates work to help crystallize that Southern identity. This is a mutually reinforcing situation. That is, the recipes she chooses help to recreate her Southern identity. While at the same time, her very Southernness—her speech, her location, her self-proclaimed regional identity—all work together to impose a Southern identity on any recipes she chooses to illustrate. Therefore, she could choose a "Midwestern" dish (does such a thing exist?) and it would "become" Southern as she performs Southernness upon it. As Judith Butler suggests, naming or labeling attaches a

material reality to an action or a person or a practice, in this case, the practice of being Southern or cooking like a Southerner (*Excitable* 3). Deen performs Southernness by executing any recipe and naming it as her own, regardless of its history. In this way, Southern identity becomes performed through her participation in cooking as well as in the recipe itself. Southern identity becomes connected to her practice of cooking. Cooking reinforces the food narratives that are associated with Southernness in a recursive relationship with the Southerner, Deen, who performs those recipes as a Southerner would.

Deen makes this food narrative of Southern identity real to viewers through her speech and actions, continually referring to herself as a “Southern girl.” In a Thanksgiving episode, she declares, “Find out the secret of my success when it comes to making the ... gooiest, chewiest, pumpkin butter cake that this good ‘ole Southern girl knows how to make” (*Food Network*, Episode PA1A01). This constant state of naming herself Southern persuades audiences, along with her accent and her Savannah, Georgia locale, works to solidify her identity. As a person who speaks like a Southerner and lives in the South, she has what Austin and Butler would call the performative authority to name herself in this fashion, and audiences believe her claims to this authority (Austin 23-24, 28-29; *Excitable* 66).

Deen can perform this food narrative of Southern identity on any cuisine. She imposes her Southernness, for example, on Thanksgiving leftovers. What was once American, in the hands of Deen, becomes superficially Southern as she acts upon the recipe, performing it with her food narrative of Southern Identity. This meal is clearly

about American National identity; however, she turns these American leftovers into Southern dishes by naming them Southern classics and attaching personal Southern stories to the recipes, which she narrates and describes as she is cooking.

In food narratives of Southern identity, Deen answers the rhetorical question Patricia Williams raises about the relationship between food and ethnicity: “What are the habits, customs, and common traits of the social group by which I have been guided in life—and how do I cook them?” (*Ethnic* 34). Deen cooks the habits, customs, and common traits of Southerners. Deen’s continued popularity and growing market presence, including new shows on the Food Network, magazines, restaurants, and food products, all create a widespread influence about what Southern identity looks and tastes like. The fact that she sustains this popularity helps to keep our ideas about what it means to be Southern solidly in place. Deen’s use of food narratives of Southern identity works ideologically to persuade viewers and the larger public of what it means to be Southern, as she enacts it.

Since television not only reflects reality, but also shapes it, any messages that are delivered through the use of food narratives are actively contributing to culture. Thus, food narratives, as they are represented on *any* cooking show become a source of influence on the shaping of that cultural reality. Moreover, because we do not recognize food narratives as a source of meaning making, we do not recognize that persuasion, as an integral part of meaning making, is occurring. Therefore, images represented on television have the potential to become highly influential for viewers as they make meaning out of those images, regardless of whether they recognize that they are doing so.



This meaning making and persuasion occurs as viewers identify with the food narratives illustrated on these shows. If these messages exist, and shape reality, then it is critical to examine how network programming might need to be reconsidered as carrying an agenda, an agenda that is invisible, unarticulated, therefore suspect, because it is attached to food and cooking shows, an area that Americans do not typically recognize as a rhetorical space because of their lack of reflective engagement with food and food ways..

### **Acts of Translation – Cooking at Home Paula Deen’s Way**

In contrast to the non-reflective and difficult to replicate cooking that the food narratives of Emeril generate and maintain, the food narratives of Deen translate more readily for viewers. The food narrative of family and love is easy to create at home. People already do this all the time, as family favorites are reproduced for specific family occasions to please and welcome. The food narrative of Southern (or regional) identity is also easy to generate in the home kitchen, as it depends only on a replication of regional or ethnic recipes that are shared by a common culture and known to be representative of that culture.

The relative reproducibility of Deen’s food narratives of family, and Southern identity result in an accessibility to reflective engagement with food through the participation in the very food narratives Deen creates and advocates for. She encourages authentic participation with food and food ways, with active and reflective engagement with food and its associated narratives through the process of sharing the personal meaning that those narratives hold for her. She tells the viewer *her* story, *her* food

narrative. She articulates it and makes it vivid for the viewer. She also explains the successful nature of her reflective engagement with food. For example, food narratives enhance her closeness to her new daughter-in-law through Deen's creation of food for a baby shower or housewarming. Finally, Deen makes these narratives easy to reproduce at home by encouraging them to share foods with the people they love as well as making recipe variations of their own, creating their own narrative by personalizing recipes and flavors.

Though at first glance, Deen may seem to be an over-the-top caricature of the Southern woman, instead she embodies reflective engagement with food practices. She believes that cooking and eating can be experiences that bind people together in meaningful ways. She purposefully wants her show to create inclusiveness and hospitality. She does not design her cooking to be exotic, insisting instead on using ingredients that would be found in a typical pantry. Uninterested in "fancy" food, Deen describes her show as a

wonderfully light, fun, family show that involves traditional recipes that are easy to follow. They are very user friendly, and they have no barriers; no matter what race, religion, culture. Everybody loves my recipes.<sup>10</sup> ("Paula's Interview")

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<sup>10</sup> Even though Deen believes that her show is accessible to everyone, this is not provable. If it is mostly white, middle class women watching, then her message of what it means to be Southern is reaching primarily that audience. Her recipes do not necessarily transcend race as she claims. This raises the issue of how race is constructed and maintained through food narratives as they are enacted on cooking shows; however, this is an area of further research that extends beyond the scope of this study, particularly as the Food Network does not make available the racial demographic of its audience.

She enacts reflective engagement with food and food narratives on her show, coming to tears when she sampled the fried chicken she had prepared with her Grandma Paul's recipe, her eyes welling up as she described her associations with family that eating this food and recreating this memory elicited for her. She chooses recipes specifically because they connect her to her past. Through her recipes, these food narratives of family and Southern identity connect her to the present and the future, also. She uses these narratives to make new memories by cooking new recipes with family so that the new recipes become a shared experience for future traditions and new ways to enact her food narrative of family and Southern identity. This process works to make new food narratives, as families cook together with new recipes that then become family food stories for current and future generations.

Deen recognizes the value of food narratives, recreating them in her recipes, on her shows, and in her restaurant, and in doing so, viewers are persuaded to participate in these narratives too. Deen sells her own reflective engagement with food as it embodies family and Southern identity. Deen's food narratives of family and Southern identity persuade viewers of the importance of reflective connections with food and food ways. However, because this positive persuasion is happening at an ideological level, the act of persuasion itself is problematic in spite of the fact that the message delivered is potentially positive. Ideology as it occurs at the level of automatic behavior, is by definition non-reflective, suggesting that the positive message Deen advocates for is undermined by the *way* the food narrative delivers this message. So regardless of the positive packaging, because viewers are unaware of *how* this persuasion is occurring,

they are still vulnerable to manipulation. That is, viewers are acting in specific ways without making a conscious choice to do so. Viewers, in the case of Deen, are just lucky that her message encourages reflective engagement with food, which does, to a degree, mitigate the ideological, non-reflective delivery of this message.

### **Food Narratives and the TV Chef: Ideology and Influence**

While Deen's food narratives clearly represent connections between the home cook and the TV chef that when reenacted at home have the possibility of leading to a productive, reflective engagement with food and food ways, the difficulty of reproducing the food narratives of Emeril's show diminishes the possibility of viewers making reflective connections with food. This act of translation between TV and reality presents a problem for viewers when they are watching cooking shows. The array of food narratives generated by *Emeril Live* and *Paula's Home Cooking* elicit audience response that viewers feel personally connected to through their own interactions with food and food ways that make food narratives on both shows feel familiar and recognizable. This familiarity opens up the possibility for food narratives to function ideologically.

As viewers attach meaning to food narratives, they are open to ideological persuasion. Because food narratives feel natural, like common sense and part of ordinary life, they remain very difficult for viewers to recognize. Yet, both Emeril and Deen, each in his or her own way, illustrate that food narratives are very much a part of how we make meaning of our food experiences. In other words, food narratives on *Emeril Live* persuade viewers how to be a male who cooks, to interact with cooking in false, shallow

ways, or to change cooking into a reductive surface experience in the name of fun and ease. Conversely, food narratives on Deen's show persuade viewers how to be connected to family, and to participate in regional or ethnic identity. Clearly, on these shows food narratives tell viewers what and how to think about their interactions with food and food ways. However, because food narratives are ideological therefore difficult, if not impossible, to see, viewers do not have an active awareness that meaning making, therefore persuasion, is occurring, regardless of the nature of the message. If viewers cannot recognize the rhetoric of food narratives, they are not in a position to actively choose how those food narratives influence the meaning making process, and if viewers are not actively choosing how food influences meaning making they are also not reflectively engaged in that process.

## CHAPTER IV

### FOOD NARRATIVES AND THE CULTURE OF FAST FOOD

With [identification] as instrument, we seek to mark off the areas of rhetoric, by showing how a rhetorical motive is often present where it is not usually recognized.

Kenneth Burke

What we believe to be true about fast food comes from three places: advertising, news and other media, and personal experiences. These beliefs are so deeply embedded in the habits of our culture that we no longer recognize, as Kenneth Burke's quote suggests, that there is a "rhetorical motive" present. Americans have come to accept fast food restaurant mythology that promises quick, efficient, affordable, and tasty food. Fast food creates food narratives that give the impression of ease and economy for the family, home cooks, and bachelors. Even though these narratives have dominated the majority of the cultural perception of fast food, there also seems to be a growing response to the affordability and convenience that have controlled the image of fast food for so long. A large outcry about the poor nutritious quality of a fast food diet in the film *Supersize Me* and book *Fast Food Nation* are reactions that are much more prevalent than they once were. There also seems to be much conversation about "green" responses to fast food as evidenced by the Slow Food movement and Michael Pollen's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, for example. However, what remains unexplored is how food narratives work as part of

the fast food equation. In other words, how do food narratives work inside, and with, what we already know about fast food and fast food culture? Fast food attaches itself to food narratives so that it comes to feel naturalized into everyday society. Fast food marketing has succeeded in capitalizing on consumers' food narratives, shifting their use from personal to commercial ends, a process that remains largely invisible because the American cultural disconnect with food practices.

In spite of what I would describe as a Foucauldian natural preoccupation with food, this preoccupation rarely takes the form of reflective engagement. Fast food, in particular, resists thoughtful participation in part due to its very structure. In addition to the speedy delivery of the food accessed through the drive through, to dine in forces people to interact with a highly inhospitable atmosphere. The physical space is not designed for lingering: the tables are cold, hard, and discourage extended sitting. The bright, primary colors of fast food restaurants are busy and keep the eye constantly engaged, looking around, never settling on one image. The hard reflective surfaces amplify sound in the noisy atmosphere of the restaurant, particularly during busy times, which further discourages lingering customers. Therefore, even though people might naturally be pre-occupied with food, fast food restaurants do little to push this pre-occupation to an engaged thoughtful level. In fact, if there were more time to think about what fast food is and does, restaurants would lose customers. It is to the advantage of the fast food industry to keep consumers non-reflective.

Fast food companies manipulate food narratives in particularly persuasive ways in order to sell product. They successfully capitalize on consumers' food narratives because

of Americans non-reflective relationship with food and food ways. In addition, because food narratives work ideologically, fast food companies are able to use food narratives to sell product as consumers are made to feel that fast food is “normal.” Fast food companies both dehistoricize fast food practices into myth as well as remove food’s authenticity and aura, making fast food a shallow representation of food consumption, which contributes to its non-reflective nature. Finally, fast food companies can create food narratives that are closely aligned with already existing food narratives, in order to ideologically persuade consumers of the cultural and fiscal value of fast food products. In these ways, food narratives sell fast food product without the consumers’ awareness that they are being manipulated to do so.

### **The Pervasiveness of Fast Food as a Cultural Habit**

Although there are many ways to eat outside the home in American culture, it is safe to say that fast food restaurants are the most successful at seducing customers through their doors, resulting in phenomenal growth for this industry in the last four decades. People do not cook as much as they used to (Spurlock 226-227), and instead of cooking, they are eating fast food.

In 1970, Americans spent about \$6 billion on fast food; in 2000, they spent more than \$110 billion. Americans now spend more money on fast food than on higher education, personal computers, computer software, or new cars. They spend more on fast food than on movies, books, magazines, newspapers, videos, and recorded music—combined. (Schlosser, *Fast* 3)



Eric Schlosser argues that eating fast food is so culturally pervasive that Americans no longer take notice. Describing the nature of how Americans routinely consume fast food, Schlosser states:

The whole experience of buying fast food has become so routine, so thoroughly unexceptional and mundane, that it is now taken for granted, like brushing your teeth or stopping for a red light. It has become a social custom as American as a small, rectangular, hand-held, frozen, and reheated apple pie. (*Fast* 3)

This “unexceptional and mundane” nature of fast food makes it feel natural, like common sense. Fast food feels automatic and unexceptional because it has become myth, dehistoricized and voided of cultural depth and disconnected from previous historic rituals of what it means to eat, as Roland Barthes argues happens to much of culture without the public’s conscious awareness. McDonald’s, because it is a benchmark in the industry, becomes the representative fast food outlet to analyze. Other fast food companies

don’t stand for the entire industry the way McDonald’s does, nor do they have the influence over the industry the way the Arches have. Whatever McDonald’s does, their competitors follow suit, from jumbo sizes to value meals to Chicken McNuggets. (Ritzer 59)

It is McDonald’s that sets the standard and the example of how to conduct business, sell product, and market to target audiences. Therefore, McDonald’s is the subject of this analysis of fast food and food narratives.

Existing outside of the public consciousness, food narratives in the hands of fast food marketing can then be used to manipulate consumers as they persuade them to

repeatedly indulge, buy and consume first the story, then the food that goes along with it. McDonald's founder Ray Kroc clearly understood the power of food narratives, even if they remained an unarticulated force. He "understood that *how* he sold food was just as important as how the food tasted. He liked to tell people he was really in show business, not the restaurant business" (*Fast* 41, emphasis added). This awareness of what successful restaurant work entails illustrates Kroc's belief that he is selling a "show" rather than food, and this "show" is ultimately constructed as a well-packaged thinly-veiled childhood food narrative of pleasure and fun, and this food narrative is sold to children early and often.

Both children and adults have a difficult time avoiding fast food culture. Media is saturated in fast food advertising. Even in the wake of a growing awareness of how unhealthy fast food is and the alarming growth of childhood obesity, the government's good intentions for food education cannot keep pace with the amount of market exposure that fast food outlets can accomplish.

In 2000 government agencies spent about \$48 million to promote nutrition and health for kids. But McDonald's alone spent fourteen times that amount--\$665 million—to advertise its McGrub in U.S. media alone (TV, radio, print and outdoor signs) that year. In all, the food industry spent \$2.7 billion advertising fast food, junk food, soda, candy, snacks, and sugar-coated cereal in 2000—56 times what the government spent on its nutrition promotions. (Spurlock 161)

This amount of media exposure is hard for consumers to escape. If myth is emptied of history through constant talk about a cultural practice, then with this level of heavy advertising intensity, fast food culture has succeeded in rising to the status of myth. Fast food advertising is so familiar that restaurant icons such as Ronald McDonald are more

familiar to children than an enormously popular cultural figure like Santa Claus (Schlosser, “True Cost”). Decades of fast food images and slogans linger in cultural memory just waiting to be triggered by a key musical note. Advertising jingles are designed to be memorable. Their tones become so familiar that there is a near-Pavlovian response to hearing the musical phrase that consumers are trained to associate with fast food. The icons and slogans become myth along with the fast foods they are meant signify. The McDonald’s jingle, “I’m Lovin’ it,” becomes somewhat sinister, then, when it takes shape as an ideological tool for manipulation. Fast food culture is myth, normalized and so common and automatic that it remains invisible to consumers.

With the persuasiveness of thousands of advertising dollars, as well as the tasty and affordable nature of fast food, people heartily consume this experience at an astounding pace:

Perhaps no other industry offers, both literally and figuratively, so much insight into the nature of mass consumption. The typical American consumes about three hamburgers and four orders of french fries every week. Roughly a quarter of the nation's population buys fast food every day - and yet few people give the slightest thought to who makes it or where it comes from. (Schlosser, “True Cost”)

In spite of how much these participants in mass consumption are eating and experiencing fast food culture and, therefore, fast food narratives, they are not actively engaging in that culture. Furthermore, the question on the minds of diners is not *whether* or not to eat fast food, but *when* to eat it. Fast food eating is habituated, representing inordinately high food consumption, as evidenced by Schlosser’s research.

The volume of consumption is so high, and this growth contributes to the rate at which fast food and fast food narratives have come to feel normal. Fast food was not always normal eating culture, yet that fast food has become “normal” and “natural” so fast is significant:

The changes prompted by fast food have occurred so quickly and have been so all-encompassing that it is now hard to conceive of a world without hamburgers served in brightly colored paper boxes, without drive-thru windows, without the same restaurants making the same food the same way in almost every American city and town. The basic thinking behind fast food has become the operating system of today's service economy, spreading identical retail environments throughout the country like a self-replicating code. (Schlosser, “True Cost”)

This self-replicating code creates towns whose commercial sections are composed of essentially the same fast food chain restaurants, so that homogenization becomes the norm. Fast food culture, as it is the same in every town, all over the country, becomes that much more situated in the psyche and habits of Americans. This phenomenon is so familiar to consumers that they can count on nearly any town in the US to provide the same eating options anywhere in the country. This assumption reveals the invisible operations of fast food culture. We know these restaurants will be available. The choice to eat outside the universe of fast food is made invisible as the abundance of restaurants is reduced to only fast food options, which then become the norm and consequently an expected and automatic situation. Fast food is simultaneously pervasive, dominant, and invisible: a powerful combination.

## Manipulation of Fast Food Products

The eternal appeal of fast food is connected to how fast food restaurants use and manipulate food and food narratives that consumers associate with its product. Fast food companies generate artificial and emotional food narratives of comfort. This is confirmed by McDonalds as it engineers and uses the specific smells of infancy and childhood, when memory formation is incredibly strong and powerful, to sell product. Taste and smell are connected to memory and desire: “Smell is a powerful sensation that helps to shape our psychology, and is strongly linked to memory....From earliest infancy, humans swiftly learn what is in their food, what is pleasant and what may be poisonous” (*Fast Food Factory*).<sup>1</sup> This relationship between food and memory is the key to food narratives: it contributes to their persuasive abilities as well as to their near invisibility. The fast food industry works hard to make connections between food and memory, ensuring that the foods they sell are persuasive both physically and emotionally, and they accomplish this through chemistry.<sup>2</sup>

Flavour is the key to the attractiveness of fast food. It is not just the blend of salt, sugar and fat, but the combination of taste and smell which is now micro-engineered by the big food corporations’ chemists.... The flavours of childhood food seem to mark us indelibly, and adults often return to these primary sensations as “comfort food” without knowing quite why. (*Fast Food Factory*)

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<sup>1</sup> “Nearly 90 per-cent of what we think of as taste is actually smell....The 10,000 taste-buds on our tongues and in our mouths can pick up the 5 basic tastes: salt, sour, sweet, bitter and “umami.” But we humans have subtle olfactory nerves that can distinguish about 20,000 odours in the tiniest amounts” (Schlosser, *Fast* 123; *Fast Food Factory*).

<sup>2</sup> Other restaurant chains, such as T.G.I. Fridays and Chili’s Grill & Bar, also use chemistry to perfect menus and attract customers (Robinson-Jacobs B1).

This report suggests that foods are engineered to appeal specifically to the “comfort food” narratives of childhood. These are food narratives that are deeply embedded in our lives, as no other explanation could exist for the “indelible” staying power of the foods we love from our childhood (Bruno B8). Food narratives create the “comfort” part of our relationship to food. Macaroni and cheese is comfort food because of our associations eating this food that were established during positive circumstances. In contrast, if one’s only experience of macaroni and cheese occurred in prison, this would no longer be a comfort food. Because foods do not physically possess the ability to create comfort, it is food narratives that must create comfort foods. What else could account for a persistent love of childhood favorites, such as McDonald’s Chicken McNuggets, or any other processed food such as Pop Tarts, Hamburger Helper, or Captain Crunch?

Fast food is engineered to be physically persuasive, a physicality that appeals to consumers on an emotional and psychological level. This chemical and physiological manipulation of food elements is so commonly an accepted practice that nearly all of our foods are modified to include some form of corn product, which is used as an affordable way to extend product yields, to add to the “mouth feel” of foods, and to act as an inexpensive sweetener. High fructose corn syrup and modified food starch, both products of corn, are the major contributors to the corn-processed foods (Pollen, *Omnivore’s* 16-31). Clearly, foods are far from their natural state, highly manipulated and processed to appeal to consumers. “Fast food is industrially processed before it is served. It requires colour additives to make it look good, and chemical flavour compounds to make it taste right” (*Fast Food Factory*; Schlosser, *Fast* 120-129). If fast food restaurants are

intentionally modifying processed foods so that consumers will associate them with “comfort food,” then fast food restaurants are actively manipulating the food narratives consumers associate with their products. This level of processing manipulation is extensive:

Food scientists also study “mouthfeel” – and can adjust crunchiness and chewiness, density and dryness, by using a range of fats, gums, starches, emulsifiers, and stabilisers. This subtle and sophisticated art is also required for snacks, drinks, confectionary, medicines, perfumes and cleaning products as well. (*Fast Food Factory*)

Science has made processed fast food taste good, which affects a consumer’s desire for the product, and food narratives ideologically reinforce this initial attraction. Together, science and food narratives contribute to physical craving and psychological dependence, as evidenced in Morgan Spurlock’s *Supersize Me* experiment. Eating all of his meals at McDonald’s for thirty days, he felt surprisingly ambivalent about no longer eating fast food; he felt he had developed an addiction (225-255).<sup>3</sup> He had succumbed to the physical and emotional connection created and cultivated by fast food companies.

Fast food restaurants are not innocent in this process of creation and cultivation. Fast food marketing has an agenda to sell product, and one way it accomplishes this goal is to manipulate the physical characteristics of foods so that they mimic qualities associated with food narratives of childhood and comfort. Not only do fast food

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<sup>3</sup> Although there is no definitive answer yet, Spurlock cites several studies that indicate the addictive potential of fats and sugars that can act on the receptors of the brain that release endorphins, similar to the way opiates work on the brain (though not to the same degree), creating a cycle of desire and addiction (92-94).

manufacturers process foods, they process them in ways that take advantage of consumers' narrative relationships with food, in particular, comfort food, by manipulating colors, textures, and smells to mimic food narratives we associate with family, safety, and reassurance. This manipulation of processed foods to mimic childhood and memory capitalizes on an attraction for and dependence upon comfort foods that are linked to consumers' well-being. By manipulating and processing foods so that they mimic childhood connections to comfort foods, that is, by manipulating foods so that consumers associate their food narratives with fast food product, fast food companies manipulate and control consumer behaviors through their food narratives of contentment, safety, and childhood. The intentional manipulation of foods to mimic comfort foods, even though these fast food reproduction often bear little resemblance to their original forms, reduces consumers freedom of choice to consume such foods and helps to explain their "addictive" quality, one that Spurlock argues is both physical and emotional.

### **Fast Food Manipulates Food Narratives: A Reduced Authenticity of Experience**

Given the large body of cultural analysis that already addresses representations of identity, family, gender, race, and class in fast food culture (Bordo; Ritzer), an articulation of food narratives as they are captured in these images is not necessary; however, food narratives play an important part in the persuasiveness and lasting persistence of these cultural representations. It is food narratives that make these representations believable and attractive. Fast food companies recognize the financially



lucrative value of manipulating foods so that they feel and taste like childhood, and they have successfully co-opted food narratives in order to take advantage of consumers, food narratives that people are attracted to as buyers, consumers, workers, and Americans. It is not just that the food is enticing to eat; it is the memory and associations connected to the food that attracts consumers. What they believe food to signify becomes captured in food narratives. The consumers' relationship to food comes to feel naturalized through the process of articulating and experiencing food narratives. The specific rhetorical messages of food narratives that fast food companies attach to their products have made fast food a lucrative and persuasive enterprise.

Fast food does not work at selling just food through its representations of identity. Fast food companies are not just appealing to a consumer's love of fried chicken, for example. They are appealing to consumers' love of *Mom's* fried chicken in particular. Fast food companies use food narratives attached to fried chicken to sell product. That food narrative of Mom's fried chicken is lurking ideologically in those representations of "mom" in fast food advertising. Anyone using this food narrative can sell product better and without the consumer's knowledge because of the non-reflective relationship people have with their own food narratives. Even though representations of what it means to be a mother are interrogated often, it is the food narrative associations that consumers attach to those representations that make fast food advertising particularly persuasive.

As it is already established, the flavors of childhood foods are a significant part of food narratives, as there is a long-lasting association between food and memory, and the research on the mind/body connection confirms the link between food and memory.

Food can be used to trigger specific bodily reactions. For example, the dosage size of medication can be reduced over time when administered simultaneously with a vivid food such as cod liver oil, as the body comes to associate the medicinal affect of the mediation with delivery of the cod liver oil. Patients can receive reduced medication along with the cod liver oil and the body produces the same result, as the cod liver oil triggers the positive effects of the medication (Moyers 71-86). Similarly, the body responds automatically to the experience of fast food, trained to expect and desire fast food with repeated exposure, causing adults to return to childhood foods, without always knowing why they feel compelled to do so. This lack of awareness about why certain foods are more attractive than others is due, in part, to American culture's lack of reflective engagement with food and food ways. These comfort foods, created through food narratives and confirmed through the connection between the mind's association and the body's recognition and memory of specific foods, become "a source of pleasure and reassurance, a fact that fast food chains work hard to promote," (Schlosser, *Fast* 123). Fast food companies keep the power of the connections that link childhood and food—or food narratives—sublimated in order to encourage consumers to buy product.

In addition to drawing on physical flavors that remind adults of the qualities of other comfort food narratives in their lives, fast food companies such as McDonald's actively promote the creation of a comfort food narrative that focuses on their specific products. Since McDonald's recognizes that "[a] person's food preferences, like his or her personality, are formed during the first few years of life, through a process of socialization" (Schlosser, *Fast* 123), this company works to create and sustain food

narratives that connect comfort and McDonald's products. For example: "Childhood memories of Happy Meals can translate into frequent adult visits to McDonald's" (Schlosser, *Fast* 123), and McDonald's actively cultivates children as customers by developing a narrative of pleasure that children associate with its brand. Schlosser explains how McDonald's captures the interest of children:

The restaurant chain evoked a series of pleasing images in a youngster's mind: bright colors, a playground, a toy, a clown, a drink with a straw, little pieces of food wrapped up like a present. Kroc had succeeded...at selling something intangible to children, along with their fries. (*Fast* 42)

Kroc generated a narrative that the children would immediately connect to his restaurant chain. This narrative of satisfaction, joy, and entertainment becomes connected to the food served at McDonald's and is then crystallized as a food narrative in the mind of a child. It is the "something intangible" of the food narrative that Ray Kroc tapped into as a way to persuade children to eat and eat, and eat again, at McDonald's.

In the process of capitalizing on fast food narratives of comfort to create life-long customers, fast food companies encourage a relationship to fast food that is distanced from meaningful engagement with food and food practices. In part, meaningful connection to food is lost because of the dehumanizing nature of fast food experiences (Ritzer 28). The postmodern social theorist George Ritzer defends this position in his critique of the cultural, economic, and culinary dominance of McDonald's that he has dubbed "McDonaldization." Eating and working at McDonald's, he argues, forces employees and consumers to act like automated machines, depending on memorization,

rather than thought. They are workers and eaters who are going through the motions of existence (28).

Working at McDonald's requires employees, in the name of efficiency and speed, to master only one skill in a mimesis of the factory assembly line. This results in workers who do not participate in the whole creation of a particular dish or meal. In other words, fast food employees disassociate their actions from the end result of what it means to feed another human being. Instead the focus is solely on dressing burgers with condiments, or dropping the fries in the fryer, for example. In a classic Marxist fashion, workers are disconnected from the means of production, participating in only a fractional part of creation that ultimately becomes dehumanizing and socially disconnecting.

Eating at McDonald's is as dehumanizing as working there, encouraging consumers to separate eating from the traditional custom of sharing food in an extended social setting that allows for interpersonal connection. Ritzer explains:

In most cultures around the world, eating is something to be savored, something to be done communally, something to be done over a long period of time. And what fast food restaurants have done is make eating into something that has to be gotten over with as quickly as possible so that you can get on to some other activity, with the ultimate being the drive-through window, where they toss your food in to you through your window, and you drive away munching on your meal while going somewhere else. Meals—and the sharing of meals—is [sic] one of the most basic of expressions. Cooking and eating are at the heart of most cultures. Yet these have been reduced to things to be dispensed with as quickly as possible. (28)

Fast food reduces experiences that historically have been, and currently should be, rich and fulfilling, as eating with others is reduced to shallowness, denuded of depth and meaning, leaving consumers with physical ill-health, in addition to an inexplicable social,

cultural, and personal disappointment. Walter Benjamin's analysis of the art image in the age of mechanical reproduction provides surprising insight into this complicated disappointment that is embedded in the food and food ways associated with fast food. Fast food, and its accompanying food narratives, as they are represented in advertising images and cultural mythology is, by definition, embedded in the Benjaminian notion of mechanical reproduction, that is, mass-produced for volume and speed, and, more specifically, not handmade. Even though Benjamin is analyzing the art image, the food image or experience is equally a place from which consumers draw and construct meaning. Just as people experiencing film images at rapid-fire pace cannot experience art in the same way as those who are standing still in front of a singular image, people eating at fast food restaurants are discouraged from pausing in a reflective moment to reflectively consider their eating practice.

Benjamin explains the connection between authentic art objects and ritual that can ultimately be used as an argument for the comparison between art images and food experiences:

We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the “authentic” work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. (81)

Art, then, as Benjamin argues, ceases to have the same social function it once had, as an object located in a historical context of ritual; it no longer becomes a location of

authenticity. This being the case, we must investigate the implications of inauthentic art images. Benjamin states:

[F]or the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics. (82)

Fast food, no longer based on historical ritual, instead becomes based on a food narrative that is hollowed of its authenticity, so that what is consumed feels connected to ritual because of its association with the food narrative. This association, this connection to a false ideal, results in a glossing over of the actual ramifications of mass producing food. Consumers are bereft of the significance of their food consumption: fast food feels authentic as consumers connect their consumption of fast food to food narratives that have clear and familiar meaning; however, the actual experience of eating fast food is politicized in ways that Benjamin predicts for art images.

The speed with which fast food is consumed contributes to what Benjamin calls the aestheticization of the political. That is, the speed and mechanization of images (or fast food, in this case) mask what should be a political issue: fast food is not attractive at all. Its tastiness and speed hide its true nature, a nature of high fat, excessive additives, low quality and over-processed ingredients, all of which are ultimately health hazards. Fast food narratives employed by fast food companies make it possible to gloss over the

actual ramifications of a myth that encourages consumers to depend on fast food, which seems as though it could sustain the body and the family. Mechanically reproduced fast food becomes an inauthentic experience, and that lack of authenticity is masked through corporate fast food's use of food narratives.

Yet contrary to what fast food establishments would have you believe about how enjoyable it is to eat at their restaurants, it seems unlikely that anything authentic can happen there. The very nature of its speed of delivery precludes reflective practices in any of these contexts. Benjamin argues that mechanical reproduction reduces authentic experience of any kind:

The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated....The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.

The testimony of its history is the narrative of its history, that is, the narrative we attach to objects, art or otherwise. Food narratives are the testimony of the history of the foods we eat. Food objects are in and of themselves neutral; however, food narratives, the testimonies we attach to foods, are not neutral. They signify and convey meaning and influence ideas and audiences. Benjamin's concept of authenticity is tied to how works of art retain that authenticity, which he argues is rooted in the aura of an original art

object, which is the residue that we absorb or participate in while we are standing in front of an art object and pausing for reflection. He states:

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. (79)

Foods that are mechanically reproduced, as they are in highly processed fast foods, also experience a reduction in aura. That is, the sheer process of reproduction diminishes the aura and taste of the original. For example, partially cooked and frozen, reheated pie squares have lost some of their original apple pie aura. Benjamin continues this line of thought: “By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced” (79). That is, we are losing touch with the historic connection to ritual that a mass produced image cannot duplicate. For example, apple pie is known for its very Americanness because of the food narrative of homemade wholesomeness, nurturance, and mothering we attach to it; however, at McDonald’s it only superficially associates with that narrative as it becomes a reproduced copy that can be accessed at any time. This access, this ability of fast food to mechanically reproduce, could have the potential to create positive political change: we could feed the poor, or work toward eliminating world hunger and starvation; however, in the case of the iconic American apple pie, this mechanical reproduction at McDonald’s through a manipulation of the food narrative, instead, reduces and diminishes the aura of



the original object, therefore the authenticity, of the experience. Fast food claims our American testimony and historic ritual—our food narrative—associated with an object and reduces this claim to a hollow shell. Fast food asks consumers to accept the food narrative in place of the food itself, and they are seduced through speed and flashiness to agree to this façade, readily and without argument.

The American apple pie food narrative decays in this process of mechanical reproduction through the ever-diminishing quality of an object's aura. Benjamin explains the social basis for the decay of an image:

It rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. (80)

In other words the loss of aura is a cyclical process in which culture, with its ability to reproduce images, insists and compels people to want to possess that image, hold it close, and be able to own it in some way. Furthermore, the fact that we can reproduce and hold the image and contain it completely in our hands impels us to recognize the reality of that possibility. This image (or food and its narrative) is reproducible and possible to possess and contain within our hands. Consumers can purchase McDonald's apple pie, hold in one hand, and consume this piece of American identity. In this product, they can buy Americanness and have it become one with their own body, in a somewhat perverse application of Burkean consubstantiality. McDonald's apple pie is dehistoricized, and in

that process of being emptied of history, it becomes a neutralized, auraless object, yet it is able to retain its symbolic relationship to American identity through its social construction as myth. The apple pie that McDonald's sells is a way for consumers to participate in the food narrative of American identity, and to eat apple pie at McDonald's is to participate and possess the object that is American identity, through the food narrative of the Americanness of apple pie. The ability to possess American identity by purchasing McDonald's apple pie suggests that the aura of the experience seems like it can be captured in this inauthentic reproduction of apple pie, and to some degree the food narrative of apple pie and American identity works to sell pie and sell Americanness. However, this commodification of American identity through the food narrative also works as a disintegration of the aura and authenticity of the experience, of what it means to participate in a national identity through shared food narratives. So not only does fast food exploit the food narrative of apple pie to sell product, it also simultaneously diminishes the quality of that food narrative by commodifying it and making it less authentic.

The authenticity of food interactions is critical to retain, as it is rooted in tradition. Benjamin explains that "the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable" (81). This position argues for the critical value of unique and authentic experiences rather than merely repetitive and shallow mechanically reproduced ones. Losing tradition mean losing touch with authentic interactions. Consumers have lost their traditional connection with authentic food and food ways and have supplanted it

with a superficial relationship with auraless foods and food ways such as the McDonald's version of American apple pie.

Clearly, the aura of food is lost in the age of fast food mechanical reproduction. Exact copies are not reproduced for nutritional value, beauty of flavor, or appearance; therefore, authentic, original creation is lost. Benjamin explains:

This situation might also be characterized as follows: for the first time – and this is the effect of the film – man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from *Macbeth*, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays. (87)

In other words, the aura that envelopes personal and original interactions with food outside of the fast food setting disappears, and with it any connection to the authentic engagement with the practice. Exact copies of a Big Mac are identically reproducible in any country at any time. Consumers are no longer interacting with an original, a meal that is created for a specific context in a specific place and time. The Big Mac can be consumed anywhere, with the expectation that it will always taste the same. In some ways this provides accessibility, accessibility and portability of American identity, as it can be consumed and possessed through the food narratives we attach to the American entity that is McDonalds, or any other American fast food restaurant that expands abroad. However, with this exact replication comes the same false sense of identity possession referenced earlier that gives the illusion of the possessibility of an image or experience

and its resulting diminishment through commodification of an object's ritual-based authenticity.

Through the manipulation of food products and their associated food narratives, fast food companies reduce the authenticity, thus the reflectivity, of fast food experiences, which, at the same time, ironically capitalizes on these same food narratives to make interactions with food feel artificially meaningful. That is, food narratives work to persuade consumers that fast foods feel particularly satisfying because they mask this reduced authenticity of experience that results from mass production.

### **Food Narratives of Family and Parenting**

In addition to selling products by using food narratives to mask inauthenticity and non-reflectivity, fast food companies create a positive association with the already existing food narratives surrounding family to generate sales.

The advertising programs of fast food companies are specifically designed to create and confirm specific food narratives. In addition to capitalizing on food narratives that create comfort foods associated with their products, fast food companies work to establish marketing relationships that foster food narratives of family and parenting. McDonald's actively pursues connections to the NBA or the Olympics to align its products with the narratives of success and patriotism that these institutions inspire (Schlosser, "True Cost"). However, it is the link with Disney that forges the strongest fast food narrative of family and parenting. Schlosser, quoting from a McDonald's

corporate memo, explains how families come to weave multiple visits to the restaurant into their daily lives:

Parents take their children to McDonald's because they "want the kids to love them. . . . It makes them feel like a good parent." Purchasing something from Disney is the "ultimate" way to make kids happy, but it is too expensive to do every day. The advertising needed to capitalize on these feelings, letting parents know that "only McDonald's makes it easy to get a bit of Disney magic." The ads would be aimed at "minivan parents" and would carry an unspoken message about taking your children to McDonald's: "It's an easy way to feel like a good parent." (Schlosser, "True Cost")

McDonald's intentionally cultivates a food narrative connection for its consumers, forging a bond between their feelings as parents and members of a family and the ability to purchase these feelings at McDonalds. Family and parenting become commodified: Would you like fries with that? becomes, Would you like parental validation with that? Yet, this food narrative of parenting is unarticulated and invisible. In fact consumers pat themselves on the back when they take their kids to McDonald's for this "treat." In this context, food narratives are working ideologically within fast food culture without the consumers' knowledge. Fast food companies exploit and capitalize on this lack of awareness, resulting in their own commercial success due to our lack of understanding of our own food narratives and how they work in our lives.

Schlosser confirms that food narratives are a powerful political component of fast food marketing in his explanation of the "My McDonald's" advertising campaign. Even though McDonald's does not admit to food narratives' persuasive power, clearly they are taking advantage of its rhetoric. Schlosser explains:

The fundamental goal of the “My McDonald's” campaign stemming from these proposals is to make a customer feel that McDonald's “cares about me” and “knows about me.” A corporate memo introducing the campaign explains: “The essence McDonald's is embracing is ‘Trusted Friend.’ . . . ‘Trusted Friend’ captures all the goodwill and unique emotional connection customers have with the McDonald's experience.” (Schlosser, “True Cost”)

Customers are made to believe that McDonald's is a source of comfort and reliability in an otherwise unpredictable world, and McDonald's generates this belief by drawing on the “good will and unique emotional connection customers have with McDonald's.” In other words, McDonald's draws on the consumer's existing food narrative relationship with its restaurants to create new McDonald's food narratives that will generate yet even more consumer behavior, and this is done without the awareness of the consumer:

[Our goal is to make] customers believe McDonald's is their ‘Trusted Friend.’ Note: This should be done without using the words ‘Trusted Friend.’ . . . Every commercial [should be] honest. . . . Every message will be in good taste and feel like it comes from a trusted friend.” The words trusted friend were never to be mentioned in the ads because doing so might prematurely “wear out a brand essence” that could prove valuable in the future for use among different national, ethnic and age groups. Despite McDonald's' faith in its trusted friends, the opening page of this memo says in bold red letters: “Any unauthorized use or copying may lead to civil or criminal prosecution.”<sup>4</sup> (Schlosser, “True Cost”)

Exposure of the “My trusted friend” narrative invites criminal prosecution. This is fast food narratives working ideologically to sell fast food, by drawing on existing food narratives to create new food narratives that will sell more and more McDonald's product

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<sup>4</sup> This same campaign works to keep underprivileged employee populations believing in the wholesomeness of their jobs (my work helps to keep families together, etc.), which helps justify low wages on a sub-conscious level (Schlosser, “True Cost”).

without the consumer ever recognizing that they are being manipulated in ways that extend beyond fair market capitalism.

The ideological function of food narratives associated with fast food results in increased sales for fast food companies. The fast food industry generates sales by making invisible the disconnection consumers might feel between eating and cooking as reflective practices and the act of eating fast food. Food narratives of easy access and cheap affordability mask these feelings of potential disconnection that might make consumers reflect on their decision to choose fast food to feed their families.

### **Food Narratives of Ease and Affordability**

Part of the success of this industry's food narratives of family and parenting depends upon its ability to actively cultivate the illusion that fast food is an easy and affordable alternative to cooking at home. However, eating out disconnects people from cooking, or in other words, it disconnects eaters (or workers) from cooking (or the means of production). This typical Marxist phenomenon along with the food narratives of ease and affordability both contribute to the acceptability of eating out *and* our lack of awareness of the problematic nature of this position. Louis Althusser explains the phenomenon of why the workers on the assembly line do not revolt: they are always "already subjects" in the recreation of their own material circumstances (300). This recreation of material consequences that result in a perpetuation of material circumstances that are less than favorable for consumers is enacted by customers in the culture of eating out in fast food restaurants. That is, consumer-subjects continually re-

inscribe, through the act of eating fast food, the validation of such an act. As they eat fast food together, they can see themselves eating together as a family in a moment that looks just like being at home and sitting down to a home cooked meal. Thus the cycles is repeated through a validating process of mimicking of homelike experiences, seeing those moments copied and then in the telling and re-telling, experiencing and re-experiencing of these moments.

Validation is further consolidated through media and other patrons and friends who affirm such experiences as “authentic” and “legitimate.” All the while, people who eat out are convinced that there is no loss embedded in the experience. Yet, consumers remain disconnected from the process of procuring, thinking, and making food, in meaningful ways. That is, the thoughtful and generative process of cooking a meal from start to finish (like producing an object on a widget assembly line from start to finish) is reduced to a meaningless reproduction of what is perceived as the only necessary part of feeding one’s body: the act of eating. As it is on the widget assembly line, there is a lack of understanding about how that one aspect of production fits in the larger scheme of the widget universe. Eating out seems meaningful, but it is hollowed-out experience, yet feels important and significant. This analysis concurs with Finkelstein’s notion of dining out as pretense. It is superficial in nature and lacks reflective engagement, and this pretense that eating out is a meaningful experience is only exacerbated by the intentionally fast and shallow nature of fast food restaurants.

Even the notion that cleaning is not required when we eat out, contributes to the disconnectedness of eating fast food. Just as it is problematic for cooking shows to never



reveal the cleaning process required after the cooking of a meal, restaurant experiences further disconnect patrons from what it means to have an authentic engagement with food and food ways. How many experiences exist in this culture in which we are able to participate wholly without any finishing steps required? That is, with any project, is there not a final step that asks us to “clean up” and put away our materials, our messy writing, our garbage? Consumers are completely disconnected from reflective engagement with cooking and eating out. Fast food restaurants, as the major recipient of consumer dollars, burden the greatest share of the disconnection between diners and reflective engagement with food and food ways. Food narratives associated and manipulated by fast food restaurant culture keep consumers purchasing product by maintaining the circumstances that allow consumers to willingly recreate and choose their own ideologically controlled subject position.

### **Reclaiming Food Narratives – Critical Responses to Fast Food**

American cultural response has been slow to recognize that consuming fast food is problematic for the body, society, and the planet. Finally, though, the fast food industry is starting to lose its persuasive influence. In the last decade, exposés such as *Supersize Me*, *Fast Food Nation*, and *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* have made significant headway against the pull of fast food and its use of food narratives, with these works reaching a larger audience than earlier critiques made by George Ritzer’s cultural analysis of what he calls McDonaldization. In addition, the Slow Food movement with a mission statement in direct opposition to fast food narratives of disengagement only

reached the US in 2000, confirming that is only in the recent past that American culture has begun to interrogate fast food and the food narratives it generates, maintains, and manipulates. It is not only the food within fast food that must be critiqued; it is the culture surrounding that food, a culture that is captured in food narratives, including narratives of gender, health, economy, and convenience. Fast food tenaciously captivates and seduces American culture through the use and exploitation of food narratives; therefore, dismantling fast food culture depends upon the exposure and deconstruction of the rhetorical space that fast food occupies and controls.

The Slow Food movement is one critical response to the food narratives embedded and deployed by fast food culture. Started in 1985 in response to the opening of a McDonald's restaurant at the foot of the Spanish Steps in Rome, the Slow Food movement rejects the escalating pace of eating and living (Matsey). The original Slow Food movement has expanded internationally outward from Italy, including an office in New York. Slow Food USA has adopted the same philosophy as Slow Food International. Slow Food USA describes its mission:

Slow Food USA envisions a future food system that is based on the principles of high quality and taste, environmental sustainability, and social justice – in essence, a food system that is good, clean and fair. We seek to catalyze a broad cultural shift away from the destructive effects of an industrial food system and fast life; toward the regenerative cultural, social and economic benefits of a sustainable food system, regional food traditions, the pleasures of the table, and a slower and more harmonious rhythm of life. (*Slow Food USA*)

As opposed to the food narratives of ease, convenience, and disposability of fast food culture, the slow food movement clearly establishes revised narratives of food and food

ways. In particular, it addresses regional and ethnic identity, environmental sustainability as well as fair labor and agricultural practices. In its defense of all of these areas, including the “pleasures of the table” and an advocacy of a “more harmonious rhythm of life,” the Slow Food movement argues for a reflective engagement with food and food ways, an engagement that is coalesced in their philosophy and mission statement. The slow food movement’s argument is rooted in the narrative of identity and culture that is connected to reflective food practices: food and identity are inseparable (*Slow Food USA*).

In addition to the Slow Food response to the overly mechanized food habits that fast food culture fosters, as evidenced in this text, texts such as *Supersize Me* and *Fast Food Nation* have also critiqued fast food’s unhealthy qualities, both physically and culturally. In growing numbers, health conscious consumers are finally making political what has been constructed through the fast food companies’ use of food narratives as enticingly beautiful (Benjamin 82). That is, fast food has a reputation for economy and ease: it is best known for being the cheapest, the fastest, and the tastiest way to eat. The allure of this reality for consumers has resulted in real health and cultural consequences. In a Benjaminian reading of the cultural climate, fast food consumption has finally become political, as companies have historically glossed over and beautified the problematic nature of fast food production and consumption in order to increase sales. That is, the deleterious effects of fast food consumption on both the body and culture have been subsumed by the food narratives of ease, convenience, and economy generated by fast food corporations. Consumers have not previously been able to see that fast food

should be a political issue because they have been dazzled by the ease, tastiness, and affordability that disguise the manipulation of the product itself as well as the manipulation of the food narratives that sell that product. This manipulation keeps consumers from actively engaging reflectively in fast food culture, which is just as producers of fast food would have it, regardless of the empirical evidence that suggests fast food is not as fabulous as the companies would lead consumers to believe.

The empirical evidence that suggests fast food is not as fabulous as companies make it out to be is most obvious in the current obesity epidemic that plagues Americans and dominates the bad publicity surrounding fast food. Schlosser argues that “the value meals, two-for-one deals and low prices on the menu disguise the real costs of fast food” (“True Cost”), and Fast food consumption contributes to the increase in obesity that the U.S. experiences every year. BBC World Service reports the following facts in support of this statement:

- Nearly two thirds of Americans are now overweight, and the US Surgeon General says 300,000 Americans die each year of obesity.
- As fast food chains spread through Europe and Asia on a rising tide of affluence, people got fatter in those countries. It is called “globesity” by the World Health Organisation (WHO).
- In 1995, the WHO estimates there were 200 million adults and another 18 million under-five children classified as overweight. By 2000 the number of obese adults had risen to 300 million.
- This is not just a problem in industrialised societies. In developing countries, says the WHO, over 115 million people suffer from obesity-related problems. (*Fast Food Factory*)

The impact of fast food on world eating culture is creating a global response. The presence of fast food outlets across the world influences how, what, and why the world

eats what it does. Although fast food businesses would rather not acknowledge the negative impact of this way of eating, they are left with little choice after the empirical evidence that reveals the connections between fast food and obesity (US Dept. of Health). The American lifestyle, as it is encapsulated by fast food, is a complex set of ideas all grouped together as one concept. That is, the American fast food lifestyle is really a series of food narratives that is generated from fast food restaurants, most clearly represented by McDonalds. Food narratives are the “how” that makes it possible to sell the American Way of Life via a fast food restaurant. Fast food restaurants are “globalizing the American way of eating, which is a way of death, really” (Robbins qtd. in Spurlock 73). Michael Pollen argues that the medical community now burdens the inevitable health crisis that a diet of fast food creates (“Unhappy”). Fast food culture has manipulated food narratives to such an extent that consumers would rather eat themselves sick and depend on medical treatments for the diseases their diet creates than give up their proclivity for and dependence upon fast food. All of these cultural responses to fast food illustrate a growing awareness of how food currently operates in American culture. This response also illustrates ways that consumers, as they become more cognizant of the negative impact of fast food and its rhetorical manipulation of food narratives, can actively reflect on their engagement with food and food ways. Active reflective engagement is one antidote to the ideological persuasiveness of fast food’s use of food narratives.

## **The Problem with Fast Food and Food Narratives**

Even though we are beginning to see the emergence of a critical interrogation of fast food, passive engagement with this part of American culture continues to be pervasive. It is food narratives that have slowed the pace of critical interrogation of fast food culture. Fast food companies use food narratives ideologically to persuade and then manipulate consumers to buy product. This manipulation results in consumers who are non-reflective and disengaged with food and food ways, creating a passive acceptance of fast food eating as a cultural practice, regardless of its reputation as unhealthy. Bridget Murray's analysis of psychologist Dr. Brownell's opening remarks to the annual APA convention in 2001 points out the passivity of Americans and their relationship to fast food culture:

Of particular concern to Brownell is America's passive acceptance of unhealthy food. Americans fail to recognize, for example, the possible damage done by such fast-food icons as Ronald McDonald. "We take Joe Camel off the billboard because it is marketing bad products to our children, but Ronald McDonald is considered cute," said Brownell. "How different are they in their impact, in what they're trying to get kids to do?" (Murray)

Her comments elucidate the ideological impact of fast food culture and its invisible yet persuasive qualities. One way to combat the passivity of fast food culture would be learning to spot food narratives as a mechanism operating in the rhetoric of fast food. That is, if fast food culture can, and is, manipulating food narratives for their own commercial ends, consumers should also be able to recognize elements of this persuasion in order to make more informed decisions about the food they consume, especially

considering the consequences fast food consumption has on health, economy, and politics, such as agricultural monocultures, globalization, and the McDonaldization of business.

However, fast food's emphasis on speed creates specific cultural consequences, beyond the criticisms of bad nutrition, labor, and economic exploitation. Americans, because of their passive approach to food and food ways, are disconnected from food and its context. In other words, food is separated from its source and its history. If we situated ourselves in this context and history, we would be more connected to the food we eat and, therefore, more connected to (and aware of) our food narratives and our use of them to make meaning. For example, fast food experiences multiple copies: a Big Mac will taste the same today as it did last week or last year whether it is eaten in Manhattan or Milwaukee or even Milan. Even though this has a perceived value based on an ability to deliver consistency, the real benefit is in the maximum exposure that occurs as those multiple copies saturate culture. If we consider the act of cooking at home a process that creates an original, then multiple copies such as the Big Mac become a depleted version of an original, resulting in an experience that is disconnected for those people who experience it. The ability to reproduce foods creates a frequency and intensity of exposure that contribute to the large scale impact of food narratives on the meaning making process.

Building on the work of Benjamin, John Berger addresses the specific social consequences that this large level of interaction carries. Before mechanical reproduction, images were limited to their physical location connected to a particular cultural context

and history. In contrast, people can encounter experiences and images in any place, at any time. Berger explains this shift:

Images are now surrounded by your wallpaper, your window, your carpet. You are seeing them in the context of your own life. The familiarity of the room you are in the people around you. Paintings were integral part of the building for which they were designed. Sometimes when you go into a Renaissance church or chapel, you have the feeling that the images on the wall are a record of the building interior life. Together they make up the building memory, so much of a part of the life and individuality of the building. Everything around the image is part of its meaning. Its uniqueness is a part of the uniqueness of the single place where it is. Everything around it confirms and consolidates its meaning. (*Ways of Seeing* Episode 1)

What Berger is suggesting here is that the meaning of an image or experience is influenced by more variables than it once was. Everything around an image is part of its meaning, whether the surroundings of an image are located in a church or museum, as was the case in the past, or whether that image is located in your own home as it now can be. Berger argues that we are no longer able to place ourselves in context with history, using art the way we once did as a culture. That is, our point of view no longer occupies one visual plane, as we experienced it before, silently standing in front of an art image. Instead, we are distanced through media, through multiple copies, to see art from multiple visual planes, and we experience that same distance with fast food. Fast food occupies multiple planes, visual, experiential, and time-spatial. Berger argues, “a people cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act as a people or class than one that has been able to situate itself in history” (last paragraph of “Ways of Seeing”). Consumers who are cut off from the history or ritual context of their food practices are also less free to choose and act as a people, making informed, reflective decisions.



Michael Pollen's argument about American's current failure to understand its historic relationship to food supports Berger's interpretation of the changes in how people interpret images and experiences. Pollen argues that we are no longer connected to the history of how to eat as we once were. We have let ourselves be guided by what he calls "nutritionism," letting "science" tell us how to eat, but that science is obfuscating and confusing for most people ("Unhappy Meals"). With more and more time and money being spent on advertising, it is not surprising that how to eat well has become more and more confusing. Michael Pollen suggests that this is intentional. The pressures and excitement of the western, fast food diet result in new responses to the overwhelming morass of information that is now associated with how we eat and feed ourselves.

The sheer novelty and glamour of the Western diet, with its 17,000 new food products introduced every year, and the marketing muscle used to sell these products, has overwhelmed the force of tradition and left us where we now find ourselves: relying on science and journalism and marketing to help us decide questions about what to eat. ("Unhappy")

Pollen argues that the impact of the excitement and ease of the western diet has created a gap between how we used to eat and how we eat now. Consumers are flummoxed, as the ability to determine what is and is not healthy to eat is obscured by business interests that influence legislation and regulations that contribute to how we farm, what we farm and what gets bought and sold. Berger would argue that this kind of intentional obfuscation of our nutritional practices, as it happens with art images, is mystification that makes something more complicated, therefore more inaccessible, than it needs to be. Pollen

would agree, claiming that “Nutritionism” is the science used to “explain” (but this process actually mystifies) how and what people should eat.

Nutritionism, which arose to help us better deal with the problems of the Western diet, has largely been co-opted by it, used by the industry to sell more food and to undermine the authority of traditional ways of eating....If your food culture were intact and healthy, you would simply eat the way your parents and grandparents and great-grandparents taught you to eat. (“Unhappy”)

Pollen suggests that the narratives we formerly had about food, what he calls the “ways of eating” of our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, are the most important tool we have to make sense of food, even though fast food advertising works hard to achieve the opposite goal by constructing and manipulating food narratives for their own commercial ends. Berger expresses this reality as it occurs when images shifted from original works of art to mechanically reproduced copies. Berger states:

The meaning of a painting no longer resides in its unique painted surface. Its meaning or a large part of it has become transmittable. It comes to you, this meaning, like the news of an event. The faces of paintings become messages. Even, pieces of information to be used to persuade us to help purchase more of the image used. (*Ways of Seeing* Episode 1)

Thus, meaning attached to an image (an advertising picture, or a food experience) becomes easily transmittable. Whereas, there used to be one singular, authentic creation (a painting, a meal cooked at home), now there are multiple copies of the same art image or meal. These images help us construct meaning in different ways when they are accessible in the same way that any other piece of information is accessible. In other

words, the meaning of images is influenced by the form that image takes. If the image is a disposable copy, we attach meaning at the level of that disposability.

Food experiences can be construed in similar ways. Cooking can be a generative, creative act, but if we mechanically reproduce food, it can no longer be an original; it is a copy and loses some of its original value.<sup>5</sup> Fast food experiences are easily reproduced and disposable and lose some of the value of the original. Fast food is non-reflective, saturated with disposable meaning located on the surface of experience, yet this mechanical reproduction is complicated by the fact that food narratives still inform our interactions with fast food. That is, the food narratives of fast food companies manipulate how people make meaning with that particular food experience. People are no longer connected to their own food experiences on an authentic, non-disposable level; therefore, they are vulnerable to the marketing manipulations that fast food companies force consumers to consider. Consumers are ripe targets—disconnected and unaware, and those consuming fast food make meaning according to these perceptions of how eating is conducted. Ultimately, fast food meaning making functions to disconnect eaters from their food experiences, leading to less reflectivity with little time to pause and think about a food experience because its meaning is as disposable as the wrapper it came in.

Again, it is Berger and Benjamin who shed light on how consumers attach meaning to fast food experiences, and which meaning is expressed and maintained

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<sup>5</sup> This is evidenced by the understanding that fine cooking is considered an art, and Haute Cuisine is, in food circles, considered the superior expression of this art form. This suggests that original, authentic gourmet meals participate in the artistic sublime, suggesting the experience of Haute Cuisine is similar to the expansive scene of mountains or oceans. That is, Haute Cuisine creates a vast intersection with the senses that suggests deep connection with artistic energy and creation, through pleasure.

through food narratives. Berger explains how images, once they become mechanically reproduced, are then easily transmittable, which carries problematic consequences.

Because paintings are silent and still and because their meanings are transmittable, paintings lend themselves to easy manipulation. They can be used to make arguments or points that can be different, very different, than their original meaning. (*Ways of Seeing* Episode 1)

Berger suggests that these easily reproduced images can now be used in ways that are quite different than was previously possible. That is, the experience of making meaning while standing alone, quietly in front of a painting becomes, instead, an experience of making meaning out of an image that can be put anywhere, at any time, at any place. For example, the Mona Lisa's image can now whiz by us on the street, attached to the side of a bus. Viewers of this image experience a different meaning or message than those standing in front of the original in the Louvre. Given that food experiences, as they are mechanically reproduced in the form of fast food, are similar to art images that are mechanically reproduced, then fast food eating experiences also lend themselves to the "easy manipulation" to which Berger refers. In other words, fast foods reproduced to be exact copies do not retain any authenticity to an original form. The Big Mac for example is not based on a Big Mac that we make at home. It does not even remotely resemble what a hamburger cooked at home might look like. It is not recreatable at home. And even though there is a "model" form for the Big Mac to take, there is no original Big Mac that is based on any actual referent. There are only copies.

Fast food companies then present these multiple copies to the public with the intention of persuading consumers with a product's very reliability in its reproduction,

and one of the key selling features of fast food becomes its reproducibility. Advertising fast food products depends on more than just providing a description of that food. It depends upon selling an idea surrounding that food; sales depend on consumer participation in the food narratives that surround fast food. Berger argues that in contrast to images in oil paintings that served as a record of experience or wealth, advertising images project what one wants to become. In other words, advertising creates a demand for product by constructing a narrative associated with that product. Berger explains:

Publicity works on the imagination. But it does something else too. Because publicity pretends to interpret the world around us and to explain everything in its own terms, publicity adds up to a kind of philosophical system. The things which publicity sells are in and of themselves neutral, just objects, so they have to be made glamorous. They have to be inserted into contexts which are exotic enough to be arresting but not close enough to us to offer a threat. (Ways of Seeing Episode 4)

Even though products do not carry any inherent social value, the desire to become part of the narrative associated with merchandise provides those objects with critical cultural capital. Food narratives operate in a similar fashion; they are attached to products, or dishes, or holidays structured around food. Even though the foods themselves are clearly not laden with meaning, the desire to attach meaning and cultural or personal capital to these foods or food experiences makes the food narratives convey persuasive social meaning. Fast food companies rely on food narratives to create a physical, emotional, or cultural desire for their product that results in sales. The fast food corporate agenda supports and is supported and maintained ideologically through food narratives that, because of their lack of reflective engagement with food and food ways, remain

uninterrogated by consumers. Fast food companies have interrogated food practices in order to better manipulate consumers, and consumers would benefit from this analysis and awareness of their food practices, particularly in light of the high exposure Americans have with fast food.

## CHAPTER V

### FOOD NARRATIVES AND POLITICS: IDEOLOGY AND INFLUENCE

Where empires introduce striving for world markets, you are “ideologically” inclined to ponder the ways of “universal spirit.” Where classes within a nation are struggling for dominance, you are likely to confuse the issue by ideas that give a semblance of national unity.

Kenneth Burke

As nations adopt a public face in the form of an elected leader, national identity coalesces in what Kenneth Burke refers to as a pondering of the “universal spirit” that lurks ideologically in all cultural practices, including food practices. In the process of an election, Americans confuse politicking and campaigning with the ideas that “give a semblance of national unity” as they are enacted through food narratives. Working ideologically, Food narratives are manipulated by candidates to persuade voters that they are the one and only person who can maintain American identity as it is embroiled and represented by the president’s physical body – a body that consumes food.

Clearly, food and politics are intimately connected, and politicians and candidates are keenly aware of how their eating choices communicate to constituents and voters alike. Thus, in a Burkean moment of mutually reinforcing identifications, voters, too, seem to accept the relationship between food and politics, even demanding that

candidates eat in ways that indicate a respect and appreciation for regional and national culture and values, identifying regional ideas with national candidates. The implications embedded in each of these assumptions—the politician’s awareness that food communicates and the voters’ awareness that this communication “counts” in important ways—reveal an acceptance of the rhetorical power of food. Food has powerful political clout, and this power comes from food narratives. In the political arena, both groups, the public and the politicians, actively use food narratives to make meaning and send messages of acceptance; however, there is virtually no discussion of *how* this persuasion occurs. Food narratives are the mechanism that turns food into a persuasive political tool.

Politicians and candidates use food narratives to persuade viewers of their electability. Food narratives can establish meaningful connections between voters and their regional and national identities. In particular, what I label as the “diner trope” allows candidates access to the persona of the “average American,” because the diner conveys meaning to voters through its associated food narratives. Candidates also use food narratives to successfully (and sometimes unsuccessfully) construct their own political identity as a way to solicit voter support. Finally, candidates as they become manifest into food products persuade voters of their electability by using food narratives to short cut voters’ thought processes on the important issues of an election. All of these uses of food narratives work ideologically to persuade and manipulate the voting public.



## **Historic Connections Between Food and Politics**

The powerful connection between food and politics is not new. A recent *New York Times* article about food and the 2008 presidential primary race explains the history of using food to persuade voters:

Food and drink have been central to American campaigns since colonial days, said Nancy Beck Young, a historian at the University of Houston. In 1758, running for office in Virginia, George Washington dispensed rum, beer and cider to voters. Andrew Jackson, considered the father of the modern organized presidential campaign, held barbecues in 1828, and William McKinley spent his 1896 "front porch" campaign sampling dishes that voters brought to his home in Canton, Ohio. (Kantor, Werschkul, Zeleny and Santora A1)

Clearly, candidates and politicians have used food rhetorically for centuries to persuade voters, and given its longevity, the use of food to influence voters must be a successful practice. However, this representative analysis of how food narratives operate in a political campaign is focused on the two most recent elections, but as long as information about elections and government is available to the public, this kind of analysis could be applied to any past or future time period.

When looking at campaign rhetoric, either visual or verbal, often it is only the immediate political issues that garner interest. The media analyzes the political rhetoric of the words and the physical presentation of the candidates; typically, the media evaluates the candidates' dress, posture, pose, eye contact, nerves, or ability to stay on message, but it takes little notice of the messages candidates send through their contact and interactions with food and food ways. Yet, candidates are well aware of the pressure to use food as a means of communication and its historic persuasiveness:

Empathy is everything in modern politics, and there is no better way for a politician to show it than fluency in the language of local food. "A premium is placed on authenticity and, short of being born and raised in a state or area within a state, demonstrating a taste -- literally or metaphorically -- for local cuisine is one of the best short cuts for connecting with voters," says Thomas Schaller, a professor of political science at the University of Maryland. (Cillizza B5)

Food becomes an important way to connect to voters, particularly since politicians are unable to connect to voters, as easily, in any other way. In Burkean terms, this literal and metaphoric connection is based on consubstantiation. Originating from the religious experience of sharing the sacrament of communion as a way to understand and become one with others who also participate in the sacrament, consubstantiation is a rhetorical position that requires both parties to share in the substance of another. Robert Heath clarifies the connections between transubstantiation and Burke's principle of consubstantiation:

As individuals enact this ritual, they become consubstantial with others who participate in it to share the spirit of Christ and God. In the theological counterpart of transformation, wafers and wine are *transubstantiated* into the flesh and blood of Christ. Such rhetoric consists of sharing substance, so that all who take on one set of terms become consubstantial. (Heath 197, emphasis added)

True understanding of the rhetorical position of the other occurs when each partakes of the substance of the other, or as Burke explains, how "in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, [and] attitudes, that make them consubstantial" (*Rhetoric* 21). Candidates who eat the same foods as voters attempt to become consubstantial with them, as they participate in a familiar food ritual. A discussion of the issues, while critical to a campaign, is often not as meaningful or

persuasive to voters as a candidate's willingness to partake of regional foods and connect to voters through this process of consubstantiation.

Put another way, a candidate's willingness to eat a fried Snickers bar (soak in vegetable oil, fry, then douse in powdered sugar for a mere 444 calories per bar) or a stack of hot cakes (preferably at the Merrimack Restaurant in Manchester if you're trying to win the New Hampshire primary), says more about a campaign's chances of winning than a pile of worthy position papers. (Cillizza B5)

Cillizza argues here that it is the rhetoric of the regional identity that voters attach to their own particular food history that then becomes the most readily tapped source of political persuasion. This regional identity forms through food narratives, or in other words, this identity forms through an ability to create and maintain a people's regional history through the creation of myth surrounding a particular food product or experience.

Participation in these regional food narratives becomes a prerequisite for stumping during elections. So not only do politicians use food to persuade on the literal level of hospitality, but they also persuade by participating fully in the food narratives of any given region whose residents they want to persuade for votes. Each region has its own specific requirements and agenda for participation in their particular food narratives:

At Virginia's Shad Planking every April, politicians and the press trek down to a patch of piney woods in Wakefield to eat bony fish, drink cold beer and listen to political stem-winders. The J. Millard Tawes Crab and Clam Bake -- honoring the state's 54th governor -- is held in August on a smoking piece of asphalt on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Arkansas has the Coon Supper -- yes, that is the official name -- where raccoon and beer are on the menu along with politics each January. Attendees (who have included Clinton as well as former Democratic Sens. David Pryor and Dale Bumpers) collectively consume between 600 and 800 pounds of raccoon meat in the small town of Gillett in eastern Arkansas. (Cillizza B5)

This requisite candidate participation in campaign food events suggests that politicians must do more than visit and talk about issues on the national agenda. Politicians must prove that they are worthy of trust, a trust that is earned through participation in, and enjoyment of, what their region considers identifying and essential food narratives associated with tradition, recreated and re-inscribed through every election year and press story that covers such events.

Though food narratives are readily accepted by both candidates and voters as a highly persuasive practice, they remain surprisingly uninterrogated and under examined in American culture. Even though regions understand and even demand that candidates participate in their local food narratives, very little discussion occurs that addresses how this food persuasion, through participation in the food narrative, actually functions. If voters acknowledge the power of food narratives in an election but fail to examine how that persuasion works, then voters are vulnerable to the exploitation of the persuasive ability embedded in food narratives.

### **Food Narratives and Regional and National Identity**

History proves that votes are at stake when candidates participate in food narratives; therefore, misfires with food narratives are as dangerous as engaged interactions are successful. Cillizza explains this phenomenon:

Modern presidential politics is littered with candidates who committed fatal food faux pas. Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry's request for Swiss cheese rather than Cheez Whiz on his cheese steak at a stop in Philadelphia during the 2004

campaign cemented the public's view of him as an out-of-touch Brahmin. During his 1976 primary race against Ronald Reagan, President Gerald R. Ford was offered a tamale at a campaign stop in Texas. He ate it corn husk and all -- a cultural and culinary no-no. Or how about Sergeant Shriver? While he was the Democratic party's 1972 vice presidential candidate, Shriver wandered into a bar in New Hampshire and said: "Beer for the boys, and I'll have a Courvoisier." (B5)

Food narratives provide both positive and negative opportunities for candidates to persuade voters; however, clearly not all candidates understand how the intricacies of this process works. Yet, food narratives are persuasive enough that the mistaken understanding of a regional food narrative works to *dissuade* voters. It is surprising that, given the seemingly clear connection between food and votes, candidates and voters are not taking the time to actively analyze the relationship between food and identity, thus protecting themselves from a potential disconnection with voters.

That voters and candidates participate in the political systems of a national election implies and insists a participation in American identity. National identity is enacted and authenticated through food narratives. We are American, in part, because of the foods we eat. Food narratives work to accomplish this task of national identity, along with other perceived national commonalities. Food theorists have explored this idea thoroughly (Manton 62; Ashley, et al. 81-82; Peckham 171), but it is the 18<sup>th</sup> Century food philosopher Brillat-Savarin who puts this the most succinctly: "Tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you who you are," suggesting that what we eat is inseparable from how we define ourselves (3). Catherine Manton agrees, arguing that:

A cuisine, therefore, is a categorization that helps society's members define themselves. This sort of societal self-definition establishes who are insiders or

outsiders to that group. Like language, a cuisine is a medium by which a society establishes its special identity. (Manton 62)

This “special identity” is a cultural uniqueness that is articulated in the language of food narratives. We understand our identity as it is defined through food and food ways through the creation of underlying food “stories.” For example, it is not enough to say that as a nation we like to eat burgers and fries. It is rather much more relevant that we, as a nation, are attracted to the images and ideas *connected with* eating burgers and fries. Burgers make us think connotatively of picnics, the outdoors, grilling, rib-sticking meals, family, simplicity, and convenience. Fries are satisfying, quick, affordable, sustaining, wholesome potato goodness. When nations define their identity through cuisine, the public draws on that identity through narratives about foods that are connected with cultural images they love.

When groups of people make similar connections to the same foods, they then have a shared food narrative. When as a country we can think of our culinary national identity as a shared understanding with people we don’t know, then we all have this story or narrative in common, in spite of the fact that we don’t know each other. In this way, we become citizens of a national food narrative. Ashley, Hollows, Jones, and Taylor consider the role of Benedict Anderson’s imagined community essential to the concept of food and national identity formation. If national identity is a “sense of belonging shared by people who in the nature of things cannot hope to know each other first hand,” then we can see food and food ways constituting that “shared sense of belonging” (81). The authors further suggest that when we acknowledge our foods “as elements in the

‘common culture’ and ‘civic ideology’ and contributors to that ‘image of their communion’ held in common by members of the nation,” we understand the role of food in creating national identity (82).

A national diet exists in a fluid way as members participate in an imagined community with shared ideologies and food practices. Nations use common food practices to secure allegiance and feel connected to the group as a whole and therefore invested in the future of the state.

Many scholars of nationalism ask, “Why have so many people been willing to kill and die in the name of the nation?” A partial answer is found in the fusion of the ideological and the sensory, the bodily and the normative, the emotional and the instrumental, the organic and the social, accomplished by these tropes and particularly evident in strategies of substantialization by which the obligatory is converted into the desirable. As Daniel argues, Peircean semeiotics can illuminate how this is accomplished, enabling an analysis of how nationalism becomes a structure of feeling through the articulation of different modes of signification (36a). (Alonso 386)

The fusion of the “ideological,” the “sensory,” and the “bodily” all work to contribute to how food works to ascribe mutually agreed upon characteristics of nationalism and therefore national identity. National identity is expressed through shared food narratives as a “structure of feeling” that is expressed through “the articulation of different modes of signification.” This signification process coalesces in meaning making for citizen subjects of a country, particularly as they participate in the process of a national election that affirms national identity at the same instant that it is created, in a recursive, mutually reinforcing process.

This shared national identity expressed through food narratives operates ideologically. The normalized thought that connects American identity to national foods, such as the burger/fry food narrative, becomes Althusserian Ideology, so when asked what our national cuisine is, we “naturally” think of burgers and fries. This “naturalness” makes food narratives feel normal and confirms their ideological nature. As discussed in Chapter II, food narratives ideologically work to maintain power systems, such as the power system of a presidential campaign. For example the moment we see Bush, or any other candidate, chomping on a big fat burger, we think: ahh, that looks “natural” for him. It looks right; he must be genuine, thus worthy of my vote. This sense of naturalness keeps voters unaware of food narrative’s ideological function. If citizens were able to recognize the ideology in place that fuels such power systems, then the existence of those systems would be in jeopardy (Althusser 300). Instead, ideology “hails” us with

practical rituals of the most elementary everyday life (the handshake, the fact of calling you by your name, the fact of knowing, even if I do not know what it is, that you “have” a name of your own, which means that you are recognized as a unique subject, etc.). (300)

These “practical rituals” of everyday life are cultural narratives that we recognize as normal, natural, and obvious, and are exemplified in the rituals and beliefs we attach to food and food ways. However, as we participate in these rituals that generate food narratives every day, we are embedded in their ideological function. We are interpellated to recognize actions as “normal” or “natural,” but we are without the means to recognize that these actions, rituals, or narratives are not *necessarily* normal, so that the political



ramifications of our participation in these everyday rituals remain invisible. Althusser argues that we only have

recognition [that] gives us the ‘consciousness of our incessant (eternal) practice of ideological recognition – its consciousness, i.e. its *recognition* – but in no sense does [recognizing our “hail”] give us the (scientific) *knowledge* of the mechanism of this recognition. (Althusser 300)

We can engage with identity as subjects in our food narratives, but because ideology operates at the level of obviousness, we do not have the “mechanism” to recognize that we are participating in the recreation of that identity, as it is designed by political systems that work to maintain such power systems. So then, food narratives, as they are everyday ritual practices that exist at the level of obviousness, work to interpellate citizens to maintain power structures, such as those associated with a political campaign. Yet, at the same time, citizens are not able to recognize that they are participating in this process of maintaining those power systems. Because they feel normal, food narratives can be used to persuade voters without the awareness that acts of persuasion are occurring: What feels like dinner becomes political manipulation.

### **Food Narratives and the Persistence of the Diner Metaphor**

During a campaign, diners serve as a site at which the meal becomes a political tool. Candidates routinely make the diner circuit, and in rural communities, in particular, this is a legitimate venue for connecting them to voters; however, when images of candidates at diners appear in the paper they function as a surface interpretation of this experience and are no longer a legitimate interaction with political issues and people.

Diner photos work rhetorically to imply that actual connection is taking place, yet no real message or knowledge is conveyed by the photo alone. Even though people realize that eating at a diner is not necessarily equivalent to being an average American, candidates attempt to capitalize on this potential equivalency. And this scene continues to be a familiar political maneuver and a regular photo-op for candidates, confirmed by the *New York Times*, when it states that “this fall, Mr. Giuliani has visited what seems like every diner in New Hampshire” (Kantor, Werschkul, Zeleny and Santora A1). The diner photo is a campaign staple now as it was in earlier elections, including the 2004 presidential campaign.

One way to explore the cultural meaning and importance of food narratives as they occur in the setting of the diner is to look beyond the surface of images for multiple levels of interpretation. In his text “Rhetoric of the Image,” Barthes suggests that the three layers of meaning in an image are the linguistic, represented by the caption or any other text the image contains; the literal or denotative, the picture is what it is, an apple represents an apple, for example; and the symbolic or the connotative, the image connects to other ideas beyond the image itself, the apple represents the fall of man (18-25; 33-37). Furthermore, Barthes describes interpretation of a press photo:

Connotation is not necessarily immediately graspable at the level of the message itself (it is, one could say, at once invisible and active, clear and implicit) but it can already be inferred from certain phenomena which occur at the levels of the production and reception of the message: on the one hand, the press photograph is an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms which are so many factors of connotation; while on the other, this same photograph is not only

perceived, received, it is *read*, connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs. (19)

Clearly, campaign photos set in the diner can and should be read as intentional rhetoric that is absorbed and interpreted for meaning, “more or less consciously,” by the public. Applying Barthes’ three levels of interpretation reveals deeper layers of meaning embedded in what might seem like an ordinary campaign photo of a diner. Any number of images of candidates eating in diners would suffice; however, a clear example of these layers of meaning is evident in an Associated Press campaign photo that ran on the front page of the *Greensboro News and Record* on the day before the 2004 Presidential election. In this picture, Democratic Party presidential candidate John Kerry was photographed eating at the Golden Nugget Diner in Dayton, Ohio, but because Kerry, like most people, was not aware or reflective with how food narratives work to create meaning for voters, he was, ultimately, at their mercy. In its most straightforward representation, this image denotatively reveals a man eating at a table with a woman and another person, whose body disappears into the borders of the photo. Kerry, looking comfortable with his sleeves rolled up, sits next to a woman in a bistro-style booth. Fixing his food with a knife and his fingers, he looks serious, thoughtful. The woman in the photo is turned toward Kerry with her arms folded on the table, in a relaxed but physically closed posture, and she looks to be in mid sentence. The table is overflowing with the detritus of breakfast: plates of pancakes, sugar, coffee cups, salt, napkins,

silverware, water glasses, even a bottle of Heinz ketchup in the distance.<sup>1</sup> The other person in the photo is an older man sitting at another table, wearing a sweater and a ball cap. Across from Kerry, we see disembodied hands dangling over a heaping portion of toast, bacon, and eggs.

It is a close environment, a place where conversation occurs. The image connotes intimacy and approachability: Kerry is a regular guy, eating regular food, in a regular way, at a regular diner with regular people. This message is clear because the image connects voters to concepts they already know and recognize: real people roll up sleeves, wear ball caps, and eat eggs. Viewers look at the picture, and they see a homey scene, one of candidate approachability. It is clear from the picture that they are eating breakfast, which is a meal that we associate with beginnings; however, this meal is also generally the smallest and lightest of our three meals, implying less weightiness, in some ways. Kerry is concentrating on his food in the photo, leaving the viewer wondering if he is listening to the woman speaking. Furthermore, he is using his fingers to prepare his food. What might be considered an un-noteworthy action registers with many voters subconsciously as “bad manners.” Bad manners or a lack of stuffiness with food tries to confirm Kerry’s status as one of the “regular guys.” All of these observations work together to project an understanding of Kerry the candidate. We are meant to feel like Kerry is one of us, an insider, eating the way we do.

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<sup>1</sup> Kerry’s marriage to Heinz ketchup heiress Teresa Heinz created problems in the election, as ketchup turned into a political signifier during the 2004 campaign, which I explore in some detail later in this chapter.

In this image, Kerry participates in the food narrative we associate with diners. Diners are for ordinary people without a lot of money to spend eating out. Diners are not a fancy or upper crust place to eat. People who see this photo do not need to analyze Kerry's politics because the food narrative of what it means to eat at a diner allows voters to skip the analysis. The food narrative already signifies meaning for voters and functions as a stand-in for thought; it functions as dehistoricized diner myth. The food narrative needs no explanation; it is obvious why candidates eat in diners; it is common sense and clear evidence of the Barthesian dehistoricization that accompanies cultural myth-making. It is precisely because it feels normal that the diner experience can be so effective for candidates. Voters do not need to think about how the connection between food and politics works, they can just fast forward to an understanding of the diner food narrative to work as an analytical meaning-making device, depending on this understanding of the diner to take the place of actual political analysis.

The words describing the Kerry photo tell us more than just a description of the image. The caption implies indecision, an image Kerry struggled with throughout the campaign. The caption states: "Democratic presidential candidate Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., has breakfast with Debra Owens, a diner at the Golden Nugget Pancake House during an unscheduled stop Sunday in Dayton, Ohio" (News and Record, AP Photo). Could a political organization of the sort needed to run a solid presidential campaign do anything "unscheduled"? Is this another pretense to create the impression that Kerry is a regular guy, impulsively dropping in at a diner for breakfast? Or worse, if a reader believes that this stop is "unscheduled" does that confirm Bush's allegations that Kerry

cannot make up his mind, cannot “stay the course”? Is he flip-flopping between the Golden Nugget and some other restaurant? Even though eating breakfast at a diner should have given Kerry the benefit of a food narrative that suggests comfort, simplicity, and in the end, a locale for the everyman, the down-home, open-to-the-people image does not work for Kerry.

Although Kerry looks like he is trying to meet people on their level, eating at the community table of the diner, it is too little too late. We know he is not a regular guy (and if we have forgotten, the Heinz bottle on the table serves as a subtle reminder). He is a wealthy, powerful senator, married to the Heinz ketchup heiress, so although Kerry is surrounded by representations of food that should persuade voters, this photo essentially works against him. Readers, a day before the election, do not want a regular guy who eats at diners when there is important work to do; it is too late to connect to the everyman image. The day before the election is a time to act presidential; they want a leader, or at least a person whom they perceive as a leader, based on a constructed image of polished professionalism. Looking at the connotative, denotative, and linguistic meanings of the diner photo, voters see multiple messages operating under the surface that ultimately affect an understanding of the candidates. Kerry’s photo tries to use food narratives and the feelings that voters associate with those narratives to his political advantage. Kerry’s use of this type of photo, at this point in his campaign, is suggestive of the power of the diner food narrative to persuade voters of a candidate’s electability. However, this diner image, although usually a typical and effective trope for voters, was, because of its untimely deployment, ultimately ineffective.

Regardless of whether or not people are conscious of these Barthesian layers of meaning, it is within the symbolic reading of images that we see evidence of cultural narratives, such as that of a “regular guy” eating in a diner. We understand these cultural narratives because they tap into deep connections with our personal and national identities, and countless examples of the diner photo-op continue to flood media outlets. Although the Kerry diner photo analysis focuses on the 2004 election, the diner trope is common to any campaign. For example, pictures and stories of John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama eating at or going into a diner have been typical media stories during the 2008 Primary race. A cultural understanding of the politician’s need to eat in a diner dominates election stumping, so much so that, a heavy diner schedule is often included in candidates’ itineraries, and at no time does a campaign manager or the public question the presence of a candidate in a diner. This behavior is naturalized. Of course politicians eat in diners. Everyone knows that. It is common sense, and a clear indication that food narratives attached to diners and politicians are ideological, therefore invisible, operating to persuade voters of a candidate’s electability in ways that make him or her human and “regular.”

### **The Manipulation of Food Narratives: Constructing the Politician’s Identity**

In contrast to Kerry, Bush was, on several occasions, able to successfully manipulate food narratives to his advantage. One particular food representation of the President involved David Letterman parodying Bush’s public comments about Kobe beef. Bush originally made these remarks during a White House “Ask President Bush

Event” conducted with small business owners. Normally an event such as this would not reach a very large audience beyond the original spectators; however, Letterman found Bush’s “Aw shucks” demeanor so amusing and ironic, that the comedian replayed this clip repeatedly during the 2004 campaign. This increased exposure served to highlight the rhetorical maneuvering of Bush’s remarks and increase the potential impact of Bush’s manipulation of food narratives. Bush tells his tale:

I want to tell you the story, which I share with a lot of people, about having dinner with Prime Minister Koizumi. Laura and I like him a lot – he is the Prime Minister of Japan. He’s a good guy. And you know, we’re eating Kobe beef there in Tokyo. (Laughter.) Pretty fancy. You get good food when you’re the president. (Laughter.) (“President” 11)

Bush uses this story with amazing skill. Many voters would consider Kobe beef an off-putting, snobby, high-class dinner. Adding to the sense of status, George and Laura Bush are eating this meal in a prestigious and powerful setting with expensive, highly prized food, yet Bush rhetorically turns this moment into a heart-warming story of connection. He embraces his audience with a storyteller’s ease. Like Jed Clampet in the *Beverly Hillbillies*, his tone rings of a homespun quality, echoing the “listen to a story about a man named Jed” narrative of the old seventies TV show. Bush constructs himself not as an elitist who eats only hand-massaged filet but as a regular guy who is “eating pretty good these days” and who is just “hanging around” with his “good guy” pal the Prime Minister.

David Letterman finds the contrast between Bush’s “good ole boy” image and the image of world leaders eating rare and expensive food amusing. Putting Bush’s



comments on endless loop only served to exaggerate the disparity inherent in the situation. Yet the Bush constituency seems not to notice this disparity, as exhibited by their congenial laughter at Bush's acknowledgement of the presidency as a chance to "eat good." The Bush camp does not acknowledge the disparity because Bush successfully melds this high status, Kobe-beef eating image with low-status "regular" beef eating, the kind a "regular guy" would do. As a culture, we value the idea that when people make it in the big leagues, they are highly respected if this new popularity does not disconnect them from their roots. Bush, then, is able to draw on this narrative we have about how good old boys who make it are the best when they do not lose their good old boy roots. Even though we have a strong food narrative that connects high status foods with inapproachability and snobbishness that most candidates try to avoid, Bush sidesteps this potential pitfall, maneuvering the situation to connect himself to a food narrative that works for him and that people can relate to. This food narrative of eating like a regular guy transforms the Kobe beef incident into an approachable, likable moment for Bush. Again, the food narrative works to think for the viewer—the food narrative is a neat package of pre-prepared (par-boiled, if you will), thoughts about what good old boys eat. Bush uses the Kobe beef incident to suppress our connections between the dominant cultural narrative that associates "high-status" foods with unapproachable-ness and snobbishness.

Unlike the Kobe beef incident in which Bush had to adapt his rhetoric to make himself seem like a "regular guy," during the President's surprise visit to the troops in Iraq on Thanksgiving in 2003, he was able to participate fully in the Thanksgiving food

narrative without having to reconfigure it first. His “impromptu” visit is captured in images that include serving and eating Thanksgiving dinner with the troops (“Bush’s Secret”). This holiday, more than any other, is a national celebration structured completely around a meal, making its food narrative that much more significant. Bush’s arrival in Iraq to eat with the troops touches our nation’s very definition of what it means to be American. Thanksgiving is an even stronger connection to American identity than the burger/fry food narrative. In particular, Bush is drawing on the celebratory feast that commemorates the colonists’ survival in a new land, a land that represented freedom from the oppressive religious arm of England. As Bush eats with the troops, this new version of an American tradition, now enacted in Iraq, works to conflate the need to survive and overcome the oppressive regime of England with the need to survive and overtake the oppressive regime of Saddam Hussein. Bush understands this powerful connection between food, freedom, and family and utilizes it to persuade the troops and voters that the Iraqi desire for the freedom from tyranny, like the early Americans’ desire for the freedom from tyranny, is a cause worth fighting for. He positions himself not as an outsider, or not even as the Commander in Chief, among these military soldiers; instead, he positions himself as an insider, serving and eating with family and friends to celebrate their mutual struggle for freedom against the terrorism of Saddam Hussein. Bush, with his trip to Iraq to celebrate Thanksgiving, manipulates the national food narrative of Thanksgiving dinner so that a revised narrative of the war and his electability as a candidate are the primary messages delivered to the voting public.

Unlike Bush, Kerry was not as successful at manipulating food narratives to his advantage. In spite of the fact that in 2004 both candidates came from money and privilege, Kerry's pedigreed New England background was a continued source for criticism, even as Kerry worked to tone down his high status image, inspiring one journalist to call him "Brie and crackers on a rugged picnic" (Alter 30). Even though the role of commander in chief carries a sophisticated culinary food narrative, as exemplified in some ways by the Kobe beef moment, candidates are still required to be Americans at heart, which they must prove with their ability to join in the national cuisine and thereby connect with the national food narrative. Shannon Peckham agrees, arguing that "deals may be sealed over banquets, but politicians are required to display their intimacy with popular food in a symbolic gesture of their electability" (176). American voters cannot accept a candidate that does not live or eat like they live or eat, even in the face of the fact that no president has ever been poor. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristoff suggests that America is one of the few world powers that insists that its leaders project an image that they are "less worldly and erudite than they really are" (A9), and this observation is also true regarding Americans' expectations of how their candidates eat as well. Food narratives work to bridge the gap between the need for presidents to be comfortable eating at banquets, sealing deals, and the need for them to be people who are easy to relate to, that is, representative of the average citizen. This average citizen message is delivered through participation in everyday foods and their associated food narratives.

For example, on the Kerry/Edwards campaign bus during a side-trip to Wendy's for some burgers, *New York Times* writer Jack Hitt describes the politicians' food behaviors:

After the Kerry Party chewed their burgers and slurped their Diet Cokes and Frosties, ... they retreated to their bus, where they were greeted with a meal smuggled in from the Newburgh Yacht Club: Shrimp Vindaloo, grilled diver sea scallops and prosciutto-wrapped stuffed chicken. (89)

Hitt goes on to point out the contrast in image between the burger-swilling bus riders and the shrimp, scallop, and prosciutto-eating fine diners (89). That this meal was delivered via the Yacht club also garners notice. Unlike Bush who is able to turn Kobe beef into a humble, down home story of a country boy who is "eating pretty good these days," Kerry's image is pegged as New England upper crust, an image that would seem unavoidable given the fact that their fancy meal was delivered to the campaign bus from the Yacht Club. Hitt's use of the word "smuggled" is also significant, suggesting that these particular foods coming on board the bus would be "illegal" or unsanctioned on some level. If we understand that the imagined community that surrounds the burger/fry food narrative functions to embrace and unite America, then, in contrast, it is clear that we do not have a comparable "Shrimp Vindaloo" food narrative. This food representation of Yacht Club cuisine on the bus does nothing but alienate Kerry from the nation's voting public. Kerry, like Bush, wants the food narrative to work for him, as he attempted in the photo at the Golden Nugget diner; Kerry wants voters to see him living the life of an average citizen, telling them: I am American. I eat what you eat. I eat at Wendy's like you do. However, Shrimp Vindaloo from the Yacht club creates a

disconnect from the food narratives of average Americans, such as the diner food narrative or the burger/fry food narrative; therefore, it creates a disconnect from Americans too. Peckham agrees that public displays of eating such as these by the candidates are an intentional symbol of national identity:

Such public demonstrations of cooking and eating project powerful messages of integrity and reinforce stereotypical models of domesticity. They suggest that the politician in question eats from the same plate as the public, is subject to the same consuming passions....homeliness finds its equivalence in nation-ness. (176)

Bush eats Thanksgiving dinner with the troops like an American, but Kerry eats Shrimp Vindaloo, which makes him un-American and, in the minds of voters who let food narratives of national identity persuade them ideologically, less worthy of their vote.

Bush successfully uses Thanksgiving to send messages to voters and the public, and even the Kobe beef discussion was a moment that he made rhetorically accessible to the average American. Bush was able to use the rhetoric of food narratives in ways that Kerry was not. Bush has a food narrative that seems authentic, one the public understands and accepts. Bush's food narrative suggests: I eat from the "same plate" that you do. Yet, Kerry's food narrative is vague, inaccessible: sometimes I eat at a diner; sometimes I eat at Wendy's, but really I want to eat Shrimp Vindaloo. This makes Kerry's trip to Wendy's seem false and inauthentic as voters recognize that Kerry is not connected to national food narratives in meaningful ways. Even though, we can accept that the Edwards clan (perhaps because of their connection to the South, which gives them hints of cultural history) makes routine trips to Wendy's (Davis B5), somehow John and Terèsa do not seem like regulars for the drive-thru dollar menu; whereas, the Bushes,

if they were not the first family, make it seem like they would really “want” to participate in the national food narrative by eating burgers and fries from a fast food restaurant. Even though Kerry continually tried to use food narratives to indicate his participation in mainstream American culture, it was also his use of food narratives that betrayed his upper class food proclivities. The final irony is, of course, that Bush is a Texas good old boy, but he is, like Kerry, from the upper crust, and his most requested meal as Texas Governor was filet mignon served with “coffee-infused red wine sauce” (Hitt 89). With the help of food narratives though, Bush keeps his appealing, good ole boy image on the surface in a believable and effective way. The limp, frameless food narrative of Kerry just is not sturdy enough to help Kerry pull off the delicate balance between homey and likeable, versus elitist and out of reach.

During the 2008 Primary race, Obama was also accused of being an out of touch elitist, after making a disparaging comment about rural America. Obama’s comment stated that many people from small towns in the Midwest, after falling through the cracks of the earlier Clinton and Bush administrations, “get bitter, [and] they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations” (McCormick). Counteracting the elitist rhetoric that plagued him after this remark, Obama appeared on home page of the *Chicago Tribune* website the next day, serving hamburgers during a lunch at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana (Brandon). Here, he is actively using the burger/fry food narrative of national American cuisine to convey to voters that he “eats from the same plate” as the average American does. Not only does he eat from this plate, but he *serves*

from this plate as well. The positionality of service conveys the antithesis of elitism of which he is being accused. However, in an attempt to capitalize on Obama's elitist reputation, Clinton's rhetorical move is equally as smooth, as she confirms her own humble connection to the masses by downing a shot of whiskey in a Texas bar, to illustrate her participation in a food narrative of the average American that mimics the diner trope (Parker A9).

Intentional use of food narratives, then, can help candidates connect with voters on a national level and provide them with a political edge. Cillizza references Bill Clinton's use of food narratives to send political messages:

Witness Bill Clinton's habit during the 1992 presidential campaign of making unscheduled visits to McDonald's for a Big Mac and fries. Clinton's weakness for fried food and the yo-yo-ing waistline that went with it helped the average voter identify with him. (B5)

People like seeing that politicians eat from same plate they do. This is how food narratives work to persuade, and Political Scientist Arthur English confirms Bill Clinton's ability to communicate through a trip to McDonald's: "It said to voters, 'He's just like me even though he's the governor or the president'" (qtd. in Cillizza B5). Voters make connections between candidates and their candidate's food choices: If candidates eat like me, they must be like me, and like the same foods I do. If we like the same foods, then we must be of a like mind. If we think alike, then the candidates know and understand me, and most importantly, I know and understand them. In this way, food

narratives stand in for active thought, replacing the analysis required to assess a candidate's actual suitability for office.

### **Presidential Candidates Become Food Products**

Another way that food narratives work to affect voters' interpretations of candidates resides in the construction of those candidates as commercial product manifestations. In a strange way, candidates are often represented as food products, and these seemingly unlikely representations contribute to already existing food narrative as well as generate new food narratives that affect voters' perceptions of the election. The problematic nature of looking at candidates as products is that this process is superficial in nature and rooted in brand recognition-type thinking that relies on food narratives for meaning making rather than on the legitimate political issues and concerns of the citizenry. The public recognizes familiar looking products associated with candidates and draws conclusions.

Whether or not we are conscious of our behavior, the food narratives we assign to products help us make meaning and develop opinions about candidates. Allen Adamson, managing director of a leading agency of brand strategy and design at Landor Associates in New York, suggests that "Americans are more familiar and comfortable navigating the world of product brands than they are the world of politics...so using brands to figure out what politicians are about is inevitable" (qtd. in Elliot C5). Perhaps this position would not be problematic if people were more reflective about their consumer behavior; however, analyzing product brands is a superficial, low-stakes activity when compared to



the high stakes attached to an election. Obviously, it takes less work for the public to decide between two kinds of bleach than it would to decide between two candidates. Yet, candidates who are packaged as, or associated with, products and brands are an ideal solution for disengaged, non-reflective voters. Candidates as products means voters only need to be familiar with the products themselves, as opposed to the issues, in order to make “informed” decisions about politics. This brand recognition is even more complicated when it accompanies a strong food narrative that also helps voters to construct meaning, therefore enhancing political persuasion. Clearly, food narratives surrounding products contribute to how voters interpret the candidates and can ultimately influence voting decisions.

At a Boston tavern during the 2004 presidential election, for example, restaurateurs designed hamburgers to represent each of the Candidates. For Kerry: “Prime aged Black Angus covered in Heinz Ketchup...and served with a ‘Mass’ of fries” (Suciu 12). For Bush: “Texas prime beef topped with Tabasco” (Suciu 12). The Bush burger’s “prime” status suggests that he is pumped up and ready for office. Tabasco suggests that he is fiery, full of energy, and perhaps even hot tempered. Kerry is “primed” as well, but he is also aged, suggesting experience and wisdom. The pun on the “Mass” of fries as the accompaniment suggests that this is a meal of the people, not only of Massachusetts but of the masses. The french fry is part of America’s national food narrative, part of our national identity, making Kerry’s burger and fry combo to the closest food connection we have to a national cuisine. Finally, Angus Beef brands Kerry.

He is marked, with this burger, as a man with a pedigree, one who is considered high status, as compared to Bush who seems to be a more “regular” beef kind of guy.

When we examine images that represent food and the candidates we are inherently drawing upon an integral and defining part of our cultural identity; that is, we are drawing on deeply embedded food narratives to signify our understanding of politicians and, therefore, of politics. The candidates-as-burgers food image culturally connects them with the all-American meal of burgers and fries, and this burger/fry food narrative helps people feel comfortable drawing conclusions about food and the messages that it conveys about the candidates. This food narrative, then, functions as a codified communication system that sends messages about qualities that candidates possess. Yet this burger/fry food narrative is so obvious and natural to Americans that it is operating without cultural awareness. Food narratives used in this way function to keep power out of the hands of voters because of the voters’ lack of reflective engagement with the actual political issues of the campaign and an over reliance on the familiarity of the food narrative. In other words, the food narratives associated with the candidates’ burgers augment and possibly replace the actual thinking of voters, sending messages about what candidates “seem” to be like as people. Voters can attach themselves to the candidates who have aligned themselves to food narratives that are already attractive and familiar, enabling them to remain passive and disconnected from what it means to participate in a democracy as a citizen subject.

In addition to using familiar food narratives to build connections between foods voters love and candidates’ ideas, products represented as candidates can also be used to

create new narratives to persuade voters. Candidates incarnated as food products can have new political value statements projected onto them through the way particular foods are used to capture a candidate's essence. The seemingly timeless practice of turning presidential candidates into food products has taken the form of hotdogs for the 2008 Presidential campaign. The Franktuary, a Pittsburg hot dog stand, designed specialized wieners for both Democratic Primary candidates, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Intending to predict the outcome of the Pennsylvania primary through a tracking of hot dog sales, the restaurant owners started their own informal "Sausage Poll" that includes two items: "Barackwurst" and "Hillbasa." The Barackwurst is a combination of Bratwurst and Knockwurst, served with "patriotic condiments," red grape tomatoes, white horseradish sauce, and blue corn tortilla chips (*Sausage Poll*). It is "a half-link of bratwurst and a half-link of knockwurst that have come together to support one common cause" (*Sausage Poll*). The Barackwurst is served with a side of "whatever you hope" (*Sausage Poll*). The Hillbasa is a full kielbasa link, also topped with "patriotic" condiments, including blue corn tortilla chips, crumbled feta cheese, and cherry tomatoes, but it is "served with a mandated side of 'Bill' pickle spears" (*Sausage Poll*).

An analysis of these two representations reveals that, perhaps like the candidates, what they have in common is greater than what sets them apart. Both hot dogs are represented as patriotic, symbolized by the colorful and American red, white, and blue condiments. Although the Barackwurst has horseradish sauce and the Hillbasa has crumbled feta, the only other major difference is the Barackwurst's two types of sausages and the Hillbasa's single serving of kielbasa. The half-links of bratwurst and knockwurst

represent a linking of two domains, suggesting either an example of racial unity or a joining of a divided political America. “Hillbasa’s” single sausage loin suggests single-minded phallic devotion, implying Hillary’s fidelity to her infamous philandering husband. The phallic image is repeated in the mandatory inclusion of the “Bill” pickle spears that clearly has sexual overtones. Finally, the text accompanying the “Barackwurst” includes, “Yes, We Grill!” in a mimic of the Obama, “Yes, We Can!” campaign slogan. Hillbasa’s text states, “Hillbasa for President,” in the same manner as her campaign slogan, “Hillary for President.”

Although created for comedic and economic effect, through the story of the Franktuary’s Sausage Poll on websites and You Tube, voters are exposed to candidates as they are embodied by food products. Representations of the candidates as hot dogs, like the earlier representations of the 2004 candidates as hamburgers, provide the possibility for voters to participate in the political ideals that each hot dog seems to capture. That is, voters can subtly move their thoughts away from legitimate political issues that each candidate embraces toward more superficial qualities embodied by these two products. On a superficial level, these two hotdogs might confirm that these candidates are not so far apart politically, as represented by their nearly similar condiments, both expressed as “patriotic.” However, Clinton’s hot dog representation is highly sexualized, and consequently, politically devalued. Obama’s hot dog unites and provides hope, leaving nothing negative for voters to ponder. As they innocently vote on *Sausagepoll.com*, or even if they are not voting and just encounter the candidates as hot dog representations on the web or in the media, voters can internalize their understanding of these politicians

through their understanding of the foods they have become. Since the publicity surrounding this Franktuary event is lighthearted and entertainment driven, the voter analysis of the representations is equally as lighthearted. The candidates as products have generated mini-food narratives of each candidate that remain unexamined, yet influential and persuasive, as voters make meaning out of these representations.

The same unexamined but influential value of candidates as food products is represented in Kerry's construction as a cereal brand during the 2004 Presidential campaign. This representation taps into a food narrative that also projects political value statements onto the candidate through his incarnation as a box of *Special Kerry*. During the latter stages of the election as Kerry support waned, an image of "Kerry the Cereal" appeared in *The New York Times* accompanied by an article about changing Kerry's image with the public by adopting a Madison Avenue advertising approach (Chwast 4.1; Tierney 4.1). Modeled after the *Special K* cereal box, the image is a full color cartoon depiction. Regardless of the fact that *Special K* is a cereal marketed toward diet-conscious adults that implies some measure of thoughtful engagement with food, the pink and yellow sun rays that seem to be flowing from behind Kerry's head suggest that this is a fun product. Unfortunately, Kerry, as he is represented in cereal, is not limited to fun. In this format of the cartoon cereal box, he seems child-like. Kerry's face is half-turned toward the front of the box, and he is holding a wimpy looking, overly-curved spoon. Neither the suit and a tie nor the wrinkles around his neck diminish the child-like qualities of the image of Kerry with his mouth half open, waving a spoon. Because the image is a cartoon and childlike, the voter already believes neither the cereal, nor the

candidate, are serious. Kerry is not represented by an adult cereal, such as *Grape Nuts* or *Shredded Wheat*. Even when they are tasty, adult cereals are more about health than fun. A certain dietary respect exists for adult cereal; we might even vote for a candidate represented as *Grape Nuts*, but *Special Kerry*, even though an adult, diet cereal, is presented as though it were for children, in an immature graphic style that is easily dismissed by voters.

The box of *Special Kerry* lacks serious contender quality that is only exacerbated by the tag lines decorating the edges of the box, indicating that Kerry is “new” and “improved.” The words are punctuated with exclamation points inside whimsical but jaggedly-shaped bubbles, reminiscent of the campy Batman fight scenes that were narrated by words that took the place of serious action: “Pow,” “Bam,” and “Zowie,” implying that this is what voters can expect from Kerry, words that only look like action. The phrases that run along the top of the box and down the side bar say, “stronger than ever” and “A hearty start for the whole country.” Both of these sentences suggest that Kerry will be a solid serving of health for the country, yet these words are more understated, harder to see, running along the perimeter of the box. In the end, it is the cartoonish man holding the spoon who controls the image, trying to sell you a heaping helping of new and improved Kerry, implying that his former incarnation was old and lousy.

Kerry, represented on the image of the cartoon cereal box, connects us to a child-like food narrative that resonates with voters at the level of identity formation as children. Regardless of whether or not voters continue to eat cereal as adults, for most Americans

consuming cereal begins early in life and carries deeply embedded images of childhood, cartoons, and milk. Put simply by the owner of The Cereal Bowl, comfort food restaurant in Miami: “There’s no one who hasn’t grown up on cereal” (Goldman D1). Voters, making this connection to a childhood cereal food narrative, could easily interpret this image of Kerry as immature or worse ineffectual, like a child, by transferring what they know of their own cereal food narrative onto Kerry, as his image is captured by the cartoon-like cereal box. The cereal food narrative stands in for active reflective analysis about what the image of *Special Kerry* might convey about politics, contributing to meaning making as voters wade through political issues, as candidates are manifest in product brands.

Another example of how voters can attach food narratives to candidates in an attempt to make meaning is Kerry’s connection to Heinz ketchup. Kerry’s marriage to the Heinz ketchup heiress created a connection to the condiment world that was strangely compelling for the public. During the 2004 Presidential campaign, ketchup and ketchup’s food narrative became political signifiers. The fact that ketchup was newsworthy at any time, during any campaign, is stunning. As a deeply associated part of the national burger/fry food narrative, ketchup functioned as a stand in for active engagement with food and politics, and as such, Republicans, feeling threatened by the potential persuasiveness of this condiment, tried to control how the ketchup food narrative contributed to meaning making for voters.

Ketchup is connected with what this country perceives as American cuisine, our national identity, and our burger/fry food narrative. The most popular condiment for our

American meal of burgers and fries is ketchup. It could be very alarming for Republicans if Democrats attached themselves to the populace through this particular food narrative. The strength of the Republican reaction alone suggests the depth of their concern, giving credence to the potential power and threat of the ketchup food narrative. The Republicans had to respond to the Kerry ketchup threat, as they had declared that “buying Heinz ketchup was like giving to the Democrats” (Rich 3.6). To combat the Republican fear that buying Heinz ketchup would contribute to the “left-wing coffers of John Kerry and Terèsa Heinz,” pro-Republican condiments surfaced (“Bush Country”). First, Bush Country Ketchup appeared, with W Ketchup emerging a short time later (Bushell F5). The need to create a viable ketchup “option” for Republicans is suggestive of the anxiety that they felt about the potential of a democratic candidate exploiting the popularity of ketchup’s food narrative. The desire for the existence of alternate ketchup choices, along with the physical act of naming this ketchup into existence, reinforces the reality and power of the American ketchup food narrative.

Creating and naming Republican ketchups is a performative act that articulates and defines the existence of the ketchup threat. The act of naming is, in essence, “to create the effect uttered” (Butler, *Excitable* 32). The importance of Ketchup within the American burger/fry food narrative is supported and confirmed further by what Butler calls “sovereign power,” exemplified by institutionalized systems and the government that make specific claims that validate, and then elevate, the importance of ketchup (*Excitable* 32-33). This institutionalized and governmental support is affirmed in many areas, including when the Reagan Administration declared ketchup a vegetable; when



voters see sales figures and stock prices that prove ketchup's popularity; when a saturation of ads in the media indicates ketchup's integral role in the enjoyment of our meals, which is confirmed by combined ad campaigns between Heinz and Ore Ida; when voters see the amount of shelf space Heinz ketchup occupies in grocery stores; or when voters encounter the sheer volume of restaurants that routinely include ketchup (and not mustard) on their tables. Clearly, ketchup is a popular American food that has a public identity with institutional and governmental associations. The use of ketchup in the campaign further adds to its governmental and institutionalized authority. Given that performatives that do not have the proper authority or "appropriateness" cannot have the desired affect, those that *do* give the impression of authority, such as the political system of an election, as part of a governmental system, would then be perceived by the voter as having greater meaning, further elevating ketchup's food narrative as important, American, and historical (Butler, *Excitable* 32, 77; Austin 34-35). The act of creating ketchup and naming it "WKetchup" or "Bush Country Ketchup" is performative and supports the already existing food narrative through the institutional authority of the election, something voters perceive as an authoritative public system. While it was in existence, Wketchup's website stated: "W Ketchup **is** America's Ketchup™" (*wketchup*, original emphasis). This is the act of the declaring and naming into existence the new, *real* American ketchup, named by Republican supporters in order to supersede the previously dominant ketchup, which was undesirably associated with the Democrats. With the right wing performative act of declaring that "you don't support Democrats. Why should your ketchup?" (Elliot C5), the creation of alternative ketchups and the

rhetorical messages surrounding them become direct campaign strategies that persuade voters through food products and food narratives.

Along with co-opting the American ketchup food narrative and making claims upon its usability in the campaign, Republicans also created rhetoric that connected ordinary and inexpensive Heinz ketchup with excessive corporate wealth. Ketchup could have connected Kerry to the masses, positioned literally on nearly every kitchen table in America. Yet right wing supporters demonized ketchup for the Kerry campaign by suggesting that the wealth he earned from his marriage to Heinz was underserved; it was wealth acquired by marriage, suggesting that he did not *earn* this connection to the ketchup food narrative legitimately. Bush's campaign denied Kerry access to the American dream narrative as well, by denying Kerry the right to participate in the American belief in Meritocracy. That is, through the rhetorical construction of Kerry as the beneficiary of Teresa Heinz' inherited wealth, Bush denied Kerry the opportunity to participate in the (somewhat erroneous) belief that all Americans have an equal opportunity to rise from nothing and create financial and social success. All of this results in a further distancing of Kerry from the American, homey ketchup food narrative that nearly all Americans embrace.

Finally, the labels on the new Republican ketchups gave Bush's campaign added strength. Bush Country Ketchup features an Elephant "trouncing" Kerry, and W Ketchup clearly references the Bush's trademark "W." On the label of Wketchup we see George Washington, whom we immediately identify with history and freedom. Republicans successfully connected their ketchup to freedom and the food narrative that it signifies,

influenced by clear labeling that redirects our attention away from Heinz and Kerry and their tainted big money corporate position toward Bush, history, and freedom.

Our associations with Ketchup are not small; they are deeply embedded in our national identity, so much so that to think about putting mayonnaise on your fries as they do in Holland is a shock to the system, inconceivable, and just plain un-American.

Bush's campaign was able to draw upon ketchup's food narrative, and Republicans were right to be concerned that Kerry's campaign would potentially align itself with such a powerful food narrative that evenly crosses the tricky borders of race, class, and gender: Ketchup is not specific to gender, ethnic cuisine, or limited to members of a particular social class. With images and text, Republicans successfully navigated the issue of ketchup in what could have been an alarming connection to the masses for the Democrats. The ketchup food narrative worked to do the thinking for voters, as the republicans rhetorically manipulated how ketchup was represented to the voting public.

### **The Political Consequences of Manipulating the Rhetoric of Food Narratives**

When we analyze all of these images and text from the campaign, we can move beyond Barthes' linguistic, connotative, and denotative meanings to see also how those messages serve to interpellate us. In other words, linguistically, the images have captions or words that accompany, or are part of, the image. These words tell us what to think and why we should think it. Consider the *Special Kerry* cereal box. The text teaches us that Kerry has changed and is now fit to lead. After looking at this image and understanding the linguistic message, we know what to believe about Kerry and why.

Connotatively, images symbolize or refer to other ideas. Our ability to interpret these images, that is, our ability to place an image within a context that constitutes additional meaning beyond the image itself, reinforces the fact that our lives indeed have a meaning that can be uncovered, interpreted, and known. That we can understand this symbolism validates our worldview of master cultural narratives as Lyotard articulates them. We put an image in its proper place of meaning, all the while feeling that when we do, we have carved out knowledge that feels “right” somehow (Althusser 300). The ability to unearth meaning from an image validates the existence of our need to create that meaning in the first place. In spite of the postmodern context that we find ourselves in, we are not satisfied, rather it does not feel “right” or “natural,” to not have or find such meaning in images.

Finally, images denotatively represent objects and practices that we recognize, such as a ketchup bottle, a hamburger and fries, or a diner photo. This recognition of objects and practices grounds us in a perceived reality, a reality that suggests that the world is discrete and knowable, thus the narrative we long for must also be discrete and knowable. In this sense, narratives, and specifically food narratives, function as what Althusser calls, Ideological Apparatuses of the State by encouraging us to accept what clearly and irrefutably is. We can see the objects, which makes them seem knowable, even though the world, or the narrative for that matter, is not really this discrete and knowable. Food narratives, then, function to generate meaning through text, symbolic association, and finally tangible objects, all working together to create an ISA that keeps citizens and voters doing what the government or politicians want them to do.

When food narratives become the tool of politics, systemized and sanctioned through an important government process such as the election, candidates can prey upon citizens, taking advantage of our dependency on food narratives for meaningful structure in our lives. Because our country shares food narratives as a part of our national identity, we become, essentially, one large, manipulatable population. If food narratives are manipulated to influence political behavior then they, in turn, serve to interpellate us. Citizens, then, are vulnerable to manipulation for a specific purpose, unable to see that the choice they are making about their candidates was not a choice at all, but the inevitable outcome of a process designed to maneuver national—thus personal—identity and behavior. National food narratives in particular transcend race, gender, and class, and this makes them a demographically powerful choice. If candidates can access food narratives, then they can claim and create our very Americanness. When food narratives, so closely tied to our identity, are situated in the realm of the political, there is a scary sense that we are open to redefinition by others. Voters are particularly drawn to cultural narratives, given that what was once so comforting and familiar, such as faith in the election process, has recently given way to doubt.<sup>2</sup> For voters, for all people, food narratives serve as a way to define not only national identity, but also our place as citizens within that nation, as subjects participating in the process of an election. So that we can still feel “okay” about believing in burgers and fries, even if we can no longer believe in politicians.

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<sup>2</sup> This doubt is the result of the highly contested results of both the 2000 and 2004 Presidential election.

It is the connection between food and subject identity that ultimately resonates the most with voters. In *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Derrida defines hospitality in terms of subjectivity. The subject who welcomes does not exist as an ego, a self-identity prior to issuing the welcome to his guest. The subject, instead, comes into being when the host opens himself up to the other. This opening to the other is infinite. It is a condition that prioritizes the “yes” of the other (that is their acceptance of the welcome) over the yes to the other (the issuing of the welcome). In other words, it is more important that the other says “yes” to the invitation, than for the host to say “yes” to issuing the invitation. To welcome does not mean to collect or gather (like a party) but to be exposed to an other greater than oneself. The roles of host/guest are inverted as the host turns himself over completely to the guest, becoming guest/hostage to the other, much like Burke’s notion of consubstantiation. A logic of substitution takes the place of a logic of subordination. If the subject is created in the welcome and the receiver is also created in the welcome in a site of infinite possibility, perhaps this is a version of the sublime: an infinite recursive and reciprocal opening that is so big that it is unencompassable. How we welcome and who we welcome then becomes critical, political. That is, who and how the candidates welcome through food narratives becomes a political statement. The candidate welcomes through food, and draws in the “guest” through an infinite creation of subjectivity. That is, the subjectivity of the voter is created precisely in ways that the politician wants it to be created. Candidates use the welcome of food narratives to invite voters into a hospitable space they already recognize and know. The subject position of the voter as guest and the politicians as host is facilitated through the politician’s use of food

narratives to create a welcome that is an infinite opening to the other, and that then consubstantially connects voters and politicians that results in the appearance of an inversion of the politician into guest and the voter as both host and guest. This Burkean rhetorical, consubstantial welcome is more than persuasive. It is dynamic, difficult to resist, and invisible.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: THE RHETORIC OF FOOD NARRATIVES –  
AWARENESS AND REVISION

We found that this wavering line between identification and division was forever bringing rhetoric against the possibility of malice and the lie; for if an identification favorable to the speaker or his cause is made to seem favorable to the audience, there enters the possibility of such “heightened consciousness” as goes with deliberate cunning.

Kenneth Burke

**Food Narratives: a Field of Critical Inquiry and a Rhetorical Device**

Food narratives are sites of meaning making for American consumers. As an integral part of persuasion and rhetoric, the process of meaning making and its relationship to food narratives finds expression in multiple contexts in American culture. As these chapters illustrate, food narratives working within the contexts of cooking shows, fast food, and politics all influence and persuade consumers into action, action that benefits those who are able to recognize food narratives as a viable and significant rhetorical device. Clearly articulated into existence, food narratives with their connections to identity, family, nationality, and the body have an intimate way of creating influence. It is clear that cooking shows, fast food corporations, and political campaigns all use food narratives to take advantage of this intimate connection between food



narratives and meaning making; however, as the targets of their persuasive tactics, consumers, too, need to be able to recognize the rhetorical power of food narratives. To not be aware of food narratives' rhetorical power is to be vulnerable to those who recognize this power to influence behavior. Furthermore, to be aware of this rhetorical power requires a reflective relationship with food and food ways that suggests an engagement with those practices at the level of intentional exchange, and it is intentional exchange that keeps Americans in control of their own cultural choices.

Roland Barthes argues that it is through food that we understand and make meaning of our relationship to culture. Food and its relationship to culture influences people within multiple contexts: food informs identity, enables participation in a national collective, enacts gendered behavior, and informs and sustains the body through understandings of health ("Toward" 24-25). There is no area of life untouched by food or our interpretations of food. As Barthes articulates, given its depth and breadth of contact in human life, food should be a field of critical inquiry. This critical inquiry, through rhetorical analysis, can provide insight into the process of how food narratives function to construct meaning. In other words, it is the relationship between food narratives and the ways they operate rhetorically to manipulate and persuade consumers within that process of meaning making that is worth critical examination. As we understand the rhetoric of food narratives, we access an ability to gain control over how that persuasion works to influence our behavior.

Though food itself holds no persuasive power Burke argues that "in the *meaning* of food, there is much rhetoric" (*Rhetoric*, emphasis added 173). As the vessel that

contains the “meaning of food,” food narratives become their own rhetorical device. They are an argument, with a speaker, audience and message, designed to persuade human agents toward action (Burke, *Rhetoric* 41). Often, the rhetorical positions of speaker and the associated argument can be overt. Advertisements and commercials, op-ed columns, blogs, and political speech making are all clear and obvious incarnations of rhetoric, designed specifically to influence consumers’ thoughts and actions. However, food narratives are not as easy to spot. Instead, they feel more like the familiar dog-eared pages of a book we have read a thousand times. They are so familiar that they are able to persuade ideologically, as their persuasiveness does not take on the typical, more recognizable forms of rhetoric. Instead, the rhetoric of food narratives is hidden, disguised by the very ordinariness of eating and cooking. Since, food narratives are woven into the ritual practices of everyday living, they become part of the ideological mechanisms that can inform and control behavior.

### **The Ideological Nature of Food Narratives**

If ideology is, as Louis Althusser asserts, “our imaginary relationship to our real conditions of existence,” food narratives represent and become that “imaginary relationship” to our real, material lives (296). Our understanding of the world, then, in part, depends upon the food narratives we create to explain these relationships with food and food practices and the ways they intersect with the larger cultural context. Food narratives, as expressed and manipulated within the contexts of cooking shows on the

Food Network, fast food, and politics, function ideologically to influence American behavior.

The ideological use of food narratives allows outsiders to step in and control behavior by manipulating consumers. This manipulation occurs when consumers attach meaning to food narratives, an attachment that occurs at the level of subject identity creation. Toby Miller argues that “the discursive tactics of cultural policy are frequently founded on accounts of subjectivity, and how to produce civil subjects” (40). He further argues that these subjects are manipulated at the level of conduct, conduct controlled through the power to self-regulate as interpellated subjects. Subjects, or consumers, then, are manipulated at the level of conduct through food narratives that encourage them to self-regulate. As Miller describes, the power to manipulate conduct happens through the deployment of “discursive tactics”:

Power is, then, the consolidation and dislocation of specific forms of speech at specific times. Power is the production of meanings in a decentered way. It does the work of demolition at certain points and construction at others because its principle task is the engineering of relations between subjects. The primary site of this engineering is at the level of governance through culture. (40)

The result of this process is the production of citizen subjects who alternately and simultaneously consume and comply (47-48). It is the “governance through culture” that is enacted through food narratives, and through that governance of culture, power, defined by Miller as the control of discourse, becomes the commodity that is gained when citizens regulate themselves to consume (buy, eat, deplete) or comply (self-regulate and civilize behavior). Food narratives, as a manipulatable force, work to control citizen

subjects through interpellation, controlled by those seeking the type of power Miller has described: TV stations selling advertising, fast food selling processed “product,” or politicians selling authenticity and worthiness.

If power is the commodity at stake when food narratives are manipulated to persuade consumers, it is the hegemonic control of that power that becomes significant. Drawing on the work of Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Miller defines the power relationships within cultural hegemony as a diverse culture that can be ruled or dominated by one group or class with everyday practices and shared beliefs providing the foundation for complex systems of domination (34) . Food narratives are comprised of both shared beliefs and everyday practices that Gramsci suggests are necessary components of hegemonic control. Hegemony, then, is the position, or the power, of the ruling class kept in place by interpellation, false consciousness, and an acceptance of the perspective of the dominant ruling class, in this case, the ruling class of America. Hegemony is accomplished through education, mass media, pop culture, *and* food narratives, all of which function in a recursive, overlapping, mutually reinforcing ideological cycle.

Accepting a Burkean definition of rhetoric as “the use of words by human agents to form attitudes and induce actions in other human agents” suggests that it is rhetoric that fuels the persuasive ability of food narratives to induce consumers into action (*Rhetoric* 41). Yet, because food narratives also function ideologically, exploitation becomes possible, when food narratives are used to persuade consumers to alter their behavior without their awareness, an issue central to all three of the contexts I explored here. Many consumers, caught in the daily cycle of living, and eating, and making

meaning through story, are oblivious to how food, thus food narratives, is being constructed to control their meaning making processes and their consumer behavior.

### **Ideology Precludes Reflective Engagement and Intentional Exchange**

Since food narratives are ideological, they feel natural and obvious and are operating at the level of automatic behavior. Automatic behavior is, by definition, non-reflective. The invisible and ideological nature of the rhetoric of food narratives circumvents reflective, thoughtful lives. Since this normalization of our food narratives keeps our interactions with food non-reflective, Americans are not attentive to how food narratives influence their behavior, leaving them vulnerable to whatever or whomever chooses to align themselves with the meaning Americans have attached to a particular food narrative. Such alignment can result in what John Berger calls easy manipulation: easy because of our heavy exposure to (and our deep and personal dependence on) food narratives. Given that food narratives are ideological, this manipulation occurring in the critical gap of dislocated awareness becomes an opportunity for others (those with interests of their own) to intercede and control the meaning making that consumers attach to those narratives.

Food narratives serve an even more crucial function than merely manipulating voters, fast food consumers, and wannabe chefs. Postmodernism, defined by Miller, is the condition in which “centralization, modernization, industrialization, modeling—in fact, development itself—are supplanted by dispersal, fragmentation, and the aesthetic” (10). Even though this fragmentation has come to feel normal and familiar, people still

find ways to offset that sense of dispersal by searching for a perhaps illusory but coherent sense of meaning and wholeness in their lives. Although there is evidence of a postmodern lack of cohesion within media, educational and government systems, people still feel the need to superimpose meaningful cultural narratives to help shape and synthesize identity, providing at least the pretense of superficial cohesion. This meaning can and does, at least in part, come from food narratives.

Given the postmodernist fragmented and disconnected place from which people view the world, all of our narratives (and our food narratives in particular) that we use to construct meaning become increasingly important. We cling to our food narratives to help provide meaning and cohesion that seems to be lacking. We are invested in the narratives to sustain that elusive meaning; therefore, we are that much more vulnerable when they are used to manipulate us without our awareness. Since we want our food narratives to be true in order to provide a meaningful framework for our lives, we defend them, and the elements that construct them, before we let ourselves feel rudderless. When outsiders align themselves with these food narratives to manipulate consumers, those outsiders are drawing upon the comfort that food narratives inspire. That is, outsiders' interests are manipulating at the site of comfort that food narratives provide as a source of meaning making. To manipulate people at the moment that they perceive themselves to be comforted suggests that manipulation of this kind is not only invisible but executed with the "deliberate cunning" and "malice" that Burke suggests can infect moments of identification. Outsiders who are able to intercede at this site of comfort and

meaning making are using Burke's "heightened consciousness" to exploit those who sustain a non-reflective engagement with food and food ways.

As feeding the body becomes easier with processed foods, restaurants, and cultural development, people become less reflective about their participation with food and food ways. It is relevant to examine how our relationship with food and food ways, expressed in the form of food narratives, function as a meaning making force in American culture. Understanding food narratives' rhetorical potential can lead to a reflective engagement with food, for without reflective engagement with food and food ways, in addition to being vulnerable to manipulation, we mindlessly forfeit our intellectual and emotional investment in the very practice that is supposed to be sustaining us.

### **The Rhetoric of Food Narratives on the Horizon**

Food narratives control behavior and maintain belief systems and power systems. These food narratives circulate in cultural contexts, and while they are circulating in culture, people use them to make meaning in different ways. They use food narratives as a stand-in for thought and as an excuse for disconnected participation with fast food. People use them to help understand and explain the world of politics in ways that are familiar and less threatening and less work than the actual world of politics, and, finally, while watching cooking shows on TV, they use food narratives as a superficial substitute for reflective thoughtful practice in their own engagements with cooking and eating.

Unlike the slightly more familiar ideology of an educational system that is somewhat more noticeable because of its sense of institutionalization, food narratives live at home. They live inside us and are therefore much more deeply ingrained; they are personal, and even though we do not usually think of food as a message, we employ it in this way daily. Mary Douglas rightly refers to our lack of thoughtful and investigative work into food and food ways as “false innocence” (“Coded” 109). We have a false sense that our food narratives are ours, and ours alone, whether we are thinking of our personal lives or our national identities. We do not believe anyone can affect our right to think of burgers, fries, and ketchup as American, yet when we do not recognize food narratives as ideology, like any other ideology, it controls us completely.

It is at this point, as J.L. Austin would say, that I must “let some of my cats on the table” (20). There is much more that needs to be explored on this topic of food narratives. Although the analysis of intersections of food narratives in this text suggest that they are often used negatively to send messages and manipulate consumers and citizens, food narratives can have many positive potential applications. Given the documented connection that illustrates how food works as one of the links between the mind and the body, food narratives, as a malleable part of that link, can be explored as a therapeutic tool in the treatment of food-related illnesses, such as eating disorders, obesity, and diabetes (Holtzman 362; Moyers 71-86). Food narratives also function as a therapeutic connection between memory, past associations, and love (Holtzman 362). All of these potential positive applications of food narratives and the ways they contribute to our symbolic understanding of health, well-being, and culture remain both unarticulated.



Recognizing the implications of our current lack of awareness of the existence of food narratives is an essential first step in unpacking the complexity of the rhetorical space that they occupy. If, as Burke suggests, symbolic action is social in nature, that symbolic experience can be revised and reformed as each individual interacts within social contexts (*Rhetoric* 21-22). Food narratives, as a part of this symbolic action, enacted in the experiences and identifications of others in a physical and emotional moment of consubstantiation, are a site that conveys, contributes to, and affects meaning making. We can revise our encounters with others, with our food narratives, and with the ways the relationship between the two informs our interpretation of what it means to exist as a participating member of American culture. A rhetorical analysis of food narratives creates an opportunity to revise those narratives in productive ways, ways that lead to an examination of how the messages delivered by this unseen mechanism control and impact our understanding of our environment, influencing our actions, behaviors, and beliefs. It is this possibility for awareness and revision of food narratives that offers the most significant intersection between cultural narrative and personal experience. This is a hopeful way to look at how we become aware of our role in the creation and maintenance of food narratives that enables us to participate actively in recognizing how those food narratives are used to make meaning in our lives, meaning that is often influenced and controlled by others without our knowledge.

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